GAMEINFORMER®

# RESIDENT EVIL 4

↙
**From our cover story:** Capcom is adapting and updating a lot of what appeared in the original Resident Evil 4. But as we learned, in the remake, new features like the aggressive enemy you see here are sure to offer surprises, even for players who know every inch of the 2005 release. Learn about what's new and what's coming back in our in-depth cover story, beginning on page 26

*Developed and published by Capcom*

**EDITOR'S NOTE**

# THE JOY OF DIFFERING OPINIONS

**MATT MILLER**
*Editor-In-Chief*

**AT THE TURN OF THE YEAR,** I always look forward to discussing the games that impacted our team over the prior 12 months. When I first joined the *Game Informer* team, I relished the chance to share and debate my opinions with others who cared a lot about the gaming hobby, which remains a highlight to this day. It's fascinating to learn what everyone has to say. I'm inevitably intrigued when something surprising comes to my attention during those conversations, surfacing a game, character, or perspective I missed.

I hope our year-end celebration translates some of that fun and enthusiasm to you as our readers. It's an incredible time to be into gaming, and selecting games to be included isn't a question of finding good things to highlight – it's which of those good things we feel most deserve a spot in our accolades. It always makes for some tough calls, which was especially true this year.

We also relish the chance to see where our staff and readers agree and differ, which is why, alongside staff selections, we set aside dedicated space in this issue to share your picks for the ten best games of 2022. Those selections came from thousands of votes cast in a month-long poll on GameInformer.com; it was great to see so many different games that captured players' attention.

Frequently, the discourse around games narrows down to a binary right and wrong answer, which I always find disappointing. What was the game of the year? Who was its most compelling villain? What studio did more to impress than any other?

We can debate and decide about those and a hundred other questions and share our opinions with the world. But our answers would inevitably be entirely different with an altered mix of people in that room. Hundreds of new releases, expansions, and creative voices every year enrich the gaming landscape, and the best we can hope to do is recommend some that stand out to us.

Part of the thrill is seeing how the games on the market lead to so many distinct opinions. Why did those games pop for specific individuals and not for others? Diverse viewpoints reveal a healthy gaming medium that offers something for everyone.

Our staff selected ten games representing our picks for the best of the year, alongside dozens more that won individual accolades in different categories and genres. Read through the issue to see what we picked, and let us know how you would have chosen differently by reaching out to feedback@gameinformer.com.

Of course, we're not just looking back over the previous year, but also ahead to what comes next. Don't miss our look at one of the most anticipated remakes in years to learn how Capcom hopes to improve on Resident Evil 4; the original release was hugely influential, so the developers have a big task in front of them. It's just one of many games that have our team especially stoked about what's ahead in 2023.

Play well. Be well.

GAMEINFORMER
RESIDENT EVIL 4
GAME INFORMER
RESIDENT EVIL 4

1

2

## RESIDENT EVIL 4

We traveled to Capcom's headquarters in Osaka, Japan, to once again enter a world of survival horror. We played two chapters of the remade Resident Evil 4 (1), getting a good taste of how the classic entry has been updated for a modern audience.

On the subject of cover images, check out this blast from the past, in which the original Resident Evil 4 appeared on the March 2004 edition of *Game Informer*, issue #131 (2). The GameCube exclusive (at the time) shared the cover with Killer 7. Our article offered one of the first looks at Capcom's masterpiece ahead of its launch, when it would go on to help redefine survival horror as a genre for years to come.

# GAMEINFORMER

Volume XXXIII / Number 2 / Issue 353

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*Used to play Guitar Hero competitively*

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*Finally finished watching the first campaign of Critical Role*

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Game Informer® Volume 33 Issue 353 February 2023 (ISSN: 1067-6392) is published monthly except April and December, at a subscription price of $19.99, by Sunrise Publications®, PO Box 144 Cedar, MN 55011. Business, Editorial Offices, Accounting and Circulation Offices: PO Box 144 Cedar, MN 55011. To subscribe or for customer service inquiries call 1-800-883-8895. Canada & Mexico orders must add $25/year additional postage. All orders must be prepaid in U.S. dollars by check, money order, or credit card. PowerUp Rewards™ Pro Card may be purchased for $12.00 (includes $7.00 S&H). Periodicals postage paid at St Paul, MN 55164-5015 and additional mailing offices. SUBSCRIBERS: Send address changes to Game Informer®, 625 Westport Parkway Grapevine, TX 76051 Attn: Guest Care. POSTMASTER: Send all UAA to CFS. See DMM 507.1.5.2); NON-POSTAL AND MILITARY FACILITIES: send address corrections to (Game Informer®, PO Box 144 Cedar, MN 55011).

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## STAFF SPOTLIGHT

### Jon Woodey

**Web Designer & Programmer**

2022 was the year of Final Fantasy XIV for me. As was the year before and will almost certainly be again this coming year. I do not possess a qualified opinion; I didn't even play God of War Ragnarök or Elden Ring (or any of the other entries in either series). Director Naoki Yoshida and his team make it very hard to stray away from Eorzea and all it offers. Perhaps I'm loyal or ignorant to a fault, and I'm missing out on some high-quality experiences. I'm curious if 2023 can finally redirect my gaming attention.

### Laleh Azarshin

**Lead Graphic Designer**

"I want off Mr. Bones' Wild Ride," has become a resounding declaration among my circle of friends. As an anxious little creature even at baseline, I've re-binge-watched myriad "comfort shows," devoured my favorite book series yet again, and taken up some comfort gaming behaviors: chasing wild horses in Red Dead Redemption 2, hoarding sweet rolls in Skyrim, and obsessively mining all planets to depletion in Mass Effect 2. Sometimes I prefer to savor the known. I'm here to say it's okay if you haven't played any of the best new games, whatever the reason.

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Capcom is in the unenviable position of trying to remake near-perfection. We've seen and played the upcoming Resident Evil 4 remake, talked to the team developing it, and have written one of the world's biggest exclusives on the upcoming survival-horror game. Check it out in our newest cover story.

### 20 **HOW VIDEO GAMES ARE ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE**

Mankind's impact on the climate is now undeniable and unavoidable. While the game industry has played no small part in climate change itself, new games on the horizon are trying to open dialogue about our changing environment – and what we can do to help.

### 38 **OUR TOP 10 GAMES OF 2022**

Hundreds of arguments and a few casualties later, we finally have our definitive list of the 10 best games of the year. Did your favorite make the list?

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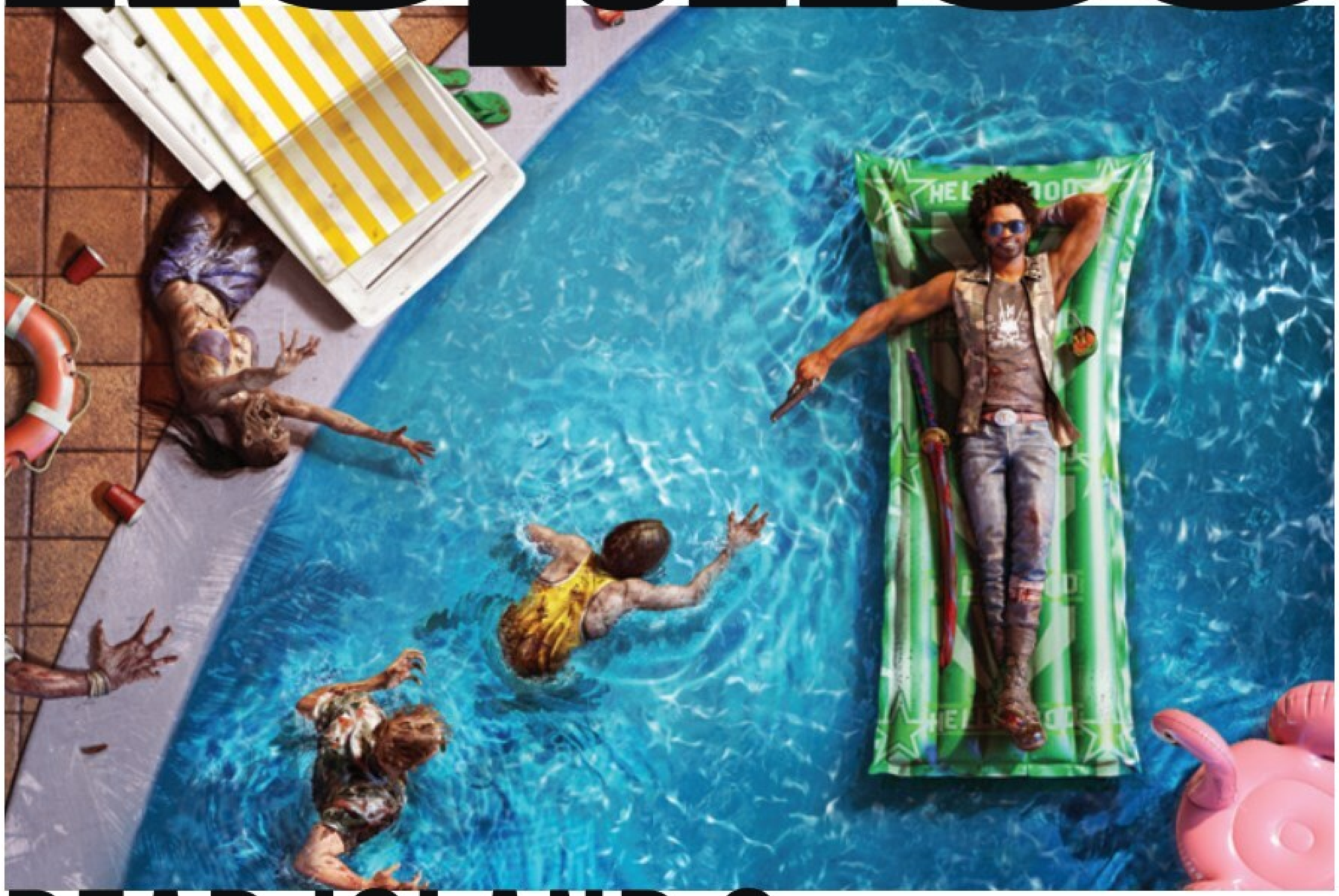


DEAD ISLAND 2

## GAMING AT ANY AGE

I loved the editor's note [*Stressed Out, Issue 352*] in my most recent issue of *Game Informer*. I had a very relatable experience myself before the holidays as I stood in line at a GameStop store to purchase holiday gifts. An older gentleman in his 60s was behind me in line and politely asked me if I was into gaming myself, even at my age (I'm 36, pushing 37 this April). I happily told him that gaming is not just for kids; it's very inclusive and filled with many diverse and varied games for any age or interest.

Right now, I'm working on No Man's Sky on my Switch, and I'm thoroughly enjoying it. After a long workday, gaming helps me destress and decompress, as well as gives me something to look forward to when I get home. Sure, some people use games as a form of escapism, but so what? If it's a positive influence in your life, you should embrace it. After all that's going on in the real world, we could all use some positivity in our lives. **– Evan via email**

I really enjoyed Matt Miller's article on Tchia [*Hidden Treasure, Issue 351*] and your magazine in general. For context, I'm an over-50 gamer playing since the days of Pong and plan to continue until my funeral or when there are no more games worth playing, whichever comes first. I chuckle when people dismiss video games – and writing about them – as childish entertainment. Matt's article is a good reason why they're wrong. **– Sean via email**

I have enjoyed reading *Game Informer* for many years. Matt Miller's most recent editor's note [*Stressed Out, Issue 352*] was awesome. I'll be 50 years old this year, and telling some people I know that I'm a "gamer" just confounds them. It is usually about an hour a day that I forget about all of life's BS and just relax, clear my head, and am able to re-energize myself. **– Bart via email**

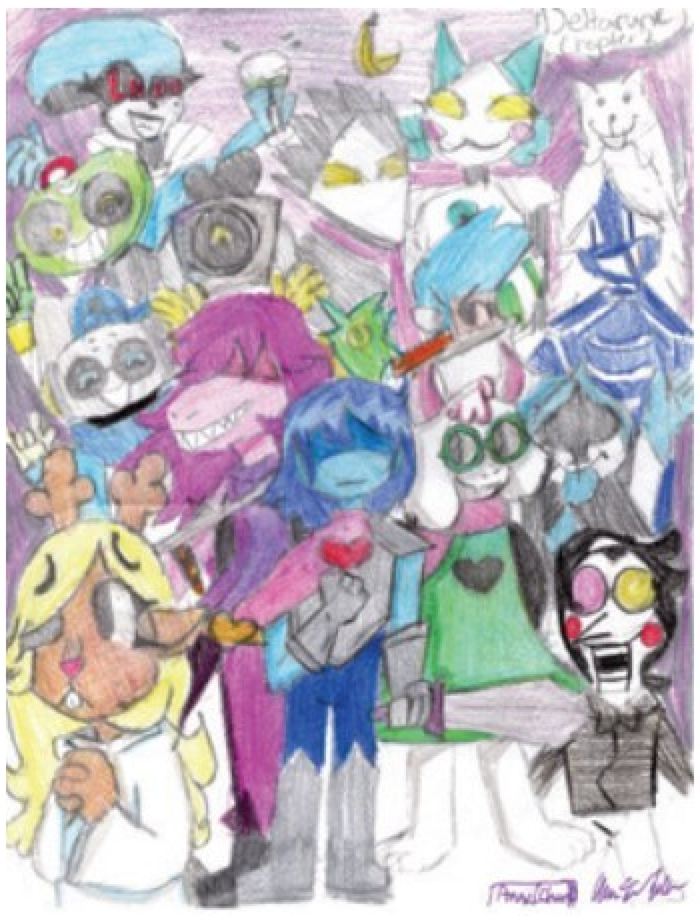
***↳ Though video games were once marketed as toys for little boys, the industry transcended that notion long ago to include members of all ages and genders. Once viewed as something you "outgrow," that idea, too, has largely fallen by the wayside as millions of gamers opted to grow up with games instead of growing out of them. Those who started gaming in the 1980s with an NES are likely in their 40s or 50s today.***

***The result is an industry that not only rakes in billions of dollars but one that produces a wide range of content appealing to an even wider range of players. It's precisely why the same industry that creates experiences like Stray, Unpacking, and Bugsnax can put out games like Elden Ring, God of War Ragnarök, and Resident Evil 4. Gaming truly is for everyone, and multiple members of the*** **Game Informer** ***staff are happy to count themselves among those with several decades of experience.***

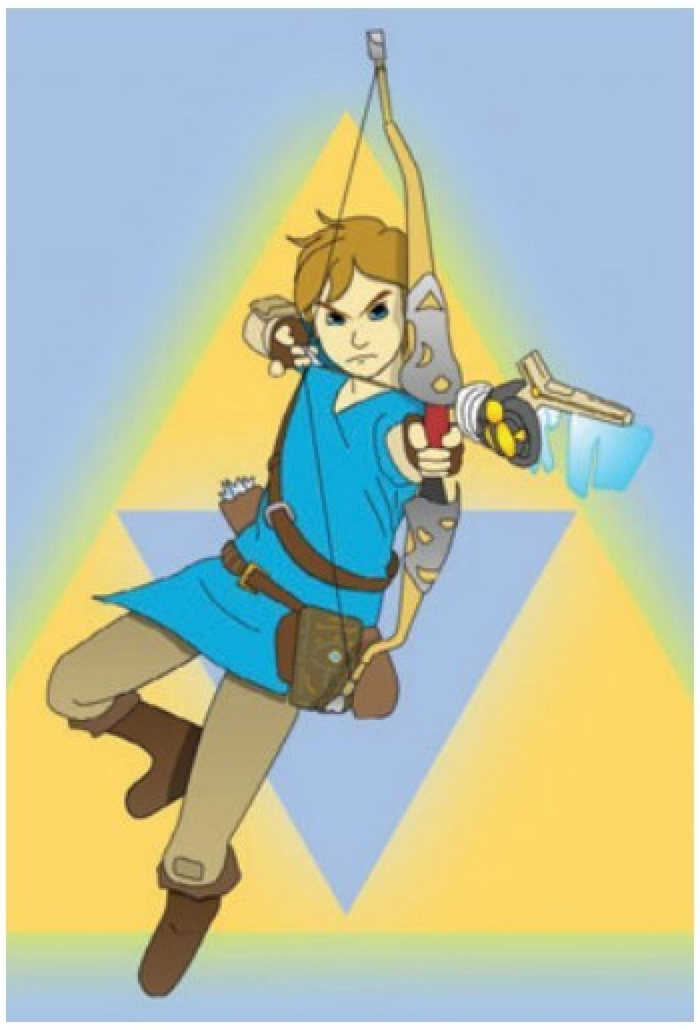
## WELCOME TO THE FAMILY!

I just wanted to let you know that I am in love with the magazine. I started reading the new issues for the past two months, and reading *Game Informer* has now become part of my daily routine. I love starting my day with a cup of coffee and reading a bit of the magazine. I have never been a magazine reader myself, but your discussion and coverage on many new games and news are excellent. I am now eager to read the next issues you will make. You have a new reader. **– Simon via email**

***↳ Thanks so much for the kind words! We may be biased, but we also love sitting down to thumb through a good magazine. We're grateful that we can fill that role in your life.***



*Reader art submission: Anna Freligh*



*Reader art submission: Luke Vecchio, age 12*

*Reader art submission: Derek Jabben*

*Reader art submission: Shawn Laws*

*Reader art submission: Madilyn Lamarche, age 10*

## THE COST OF ENTRY

So, Microsoft is raising the price of its exclusives to $70, eh? I'm not surprised. With all the season/battle passes, microtransactions, DLC, and expansion packs available for the majority of our games, we easily spend far more than $70 for some of these triple-A titles!

I will say, with great price hikes comes great responsibility. Sony can justify selling its exclusives for $10 higher because they produce highly rated software. Starfield hasn't proven itself yet. We're still waiting to see, hear, smell something... anything about the new Fable.

Hellblade 2 and Perfect Dark (reboot) have both gone missing. I'm wondering if The Coalition can evolve the Gears franchise without trying to reinvent the wheel. Hopefully, we'll have the answers to all my questions soon. **– O.G. (Original Gamer) via email**

I can justify some triple-A games costing $70, such as the upcoming Dragon Age: Dreadwolf, but not every game coming out. Smaller upcoming games like GreedFall 2 should not be $70, just the major triple-A titles. Bad enough we have to pay $500 to $1,000 for a PC or a game console. People have no idea what other people go through or how they live, so they make fun of others for not having a next-gen console or PC. There is a thing called everyday life: paying bills, medical, inflation, or various other deals that prevent people from spending $70 on a game or $500 to $1,000 on a console or high-end PC. **– Rocky via email**

↳ *Xbox joining PlayStation in raising its prices to $70 was a hot-button issue for our readers in late 2022. Unfortunately, this hike was inevitable; everything from groceries to streaming services is getting more expensive. Sadly, game development is not immune, so once one publisher showed it didn't drastically impact sales, it paved the way for others to follow suit. It's a disheartening trend for gamers, but perhaps necessary when factoring in the ever-increasing costs of game development.*

*Gaming is among the most expensive mainstream hobbies; in addition to buying individual games that often range from $20 to $70 a piece, you need to have an expensive piece of hardware to play them. There's no definitive answer for how to adapt to it, as everybody's financial situation is different. However, waiting for a game to go on sale is a great way to combat this hike. Some games go on sale mere weeks after they hit store shelves, and digital storefronts are always holding limited-time sales. If you can deal with having a small amount of FOMO, start there. Additionally, this makes a better case for the value of subscription services like PlayStation Plus and Xbox Game Pass, though there's always a chance those go up in price soon as well.*

↘
**Join the conversation**

Send your questions, comments, and rants to Feedback@GameInformer.com

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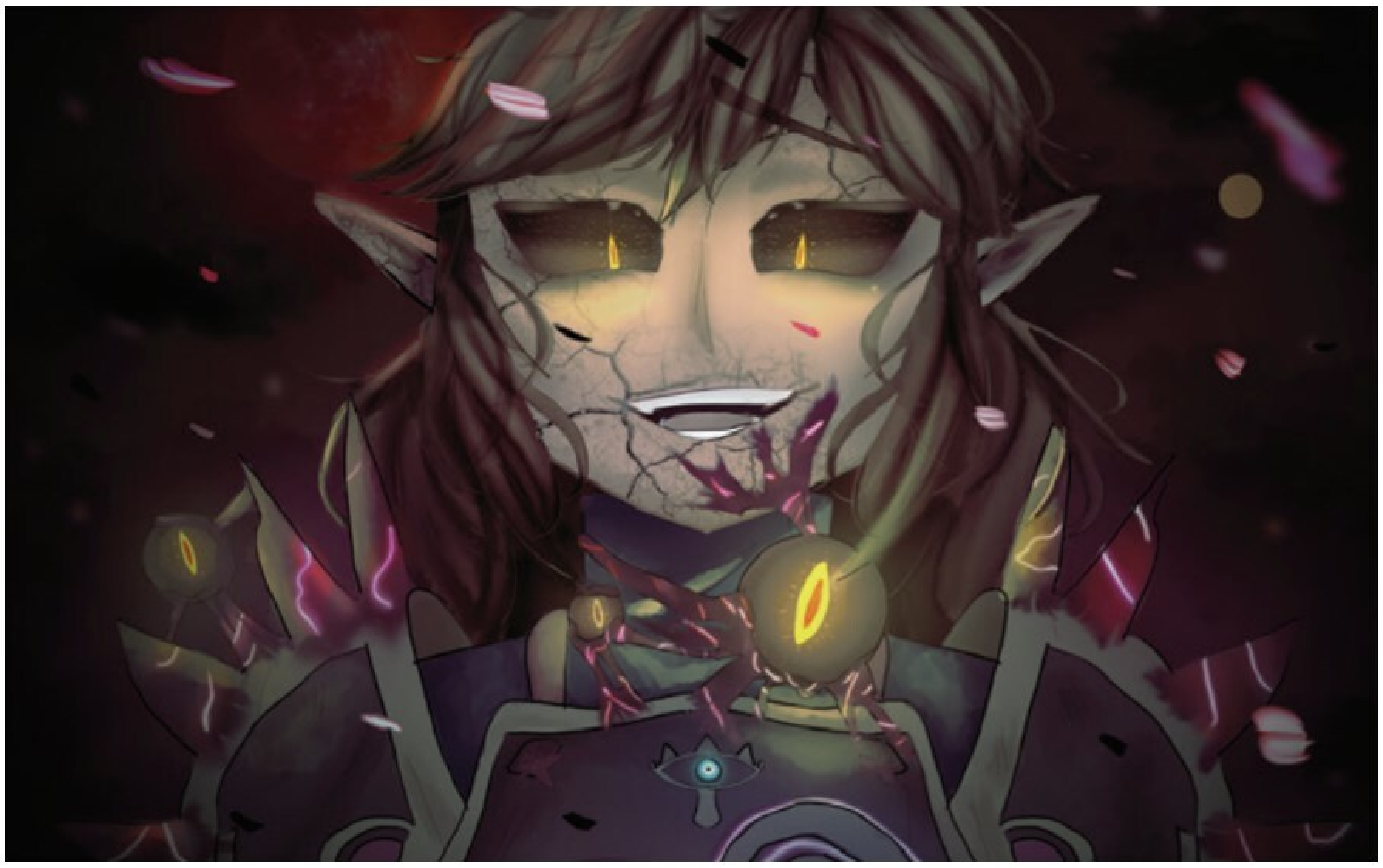


*Reader art submission: Lily Prati, age 14*

# Soundoff: 2023 games readers are excited for

**We asked our readers what games they're most excited for in 2023. Here are some of their responses:**

Definitely Starfield. I want to hop back inside Todd Howard's mad world of video games and dragons. I'm also curious to see their new engine, whether or not it meets the hype/scope they described, and how similar it plays to Elder Scrolls or Fallout games. **– Jherb24 via Discord**

Final Fantasy XVI. I liked the combat from XV and VII Remake, but I want the old medieval-type setting. Plus, the OST sounds sick so far. **– SnakeEater1964 via Discord**

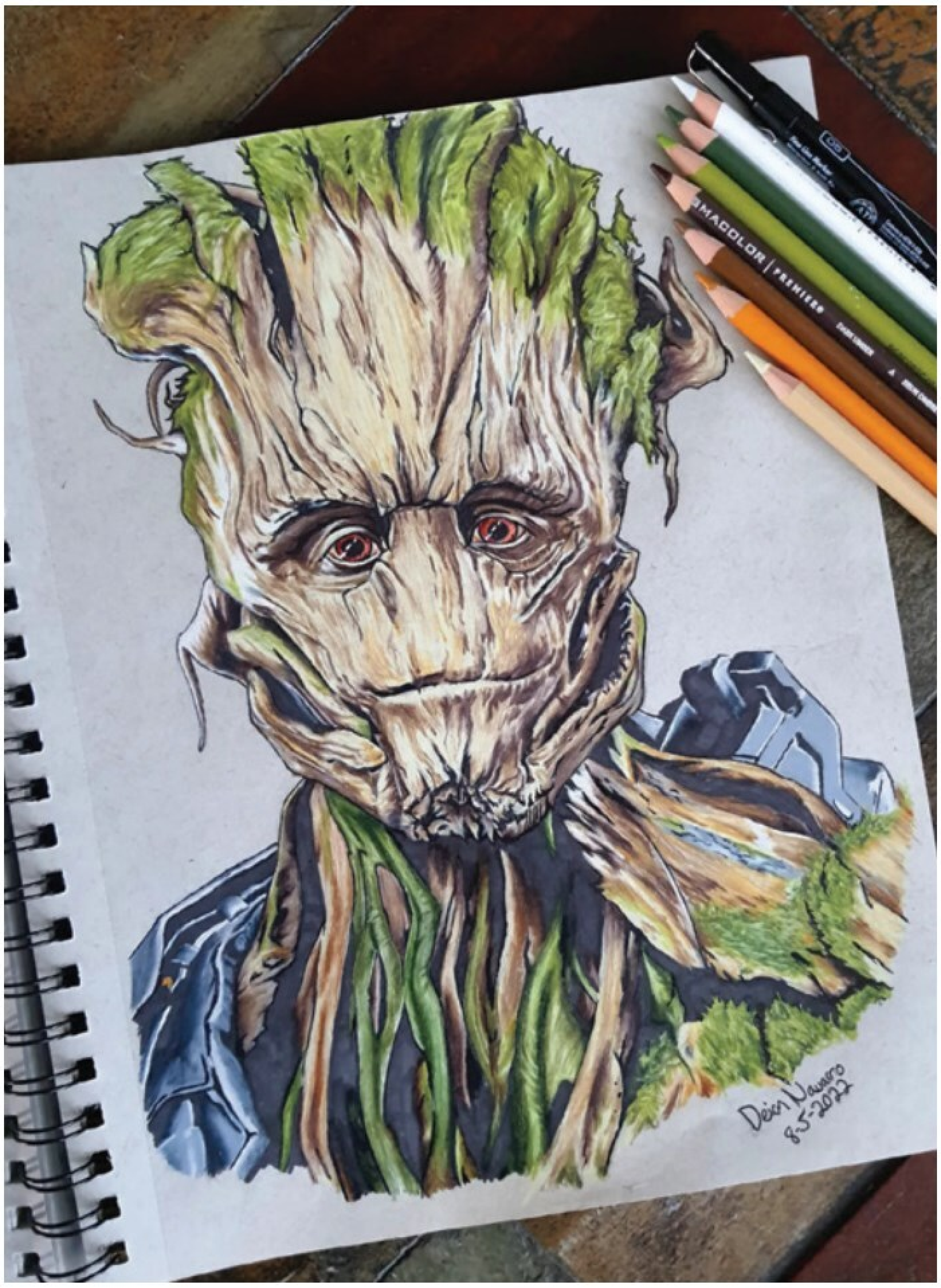
Telltale's Expanse game because I'm really excited to see what Deck Nine can do outside of the Life is Strange universe, The Plucky Squire because the art style is adorable, and Hogwarts Legacy because the 11-year-old in me always wanted a letter to Hogwarts! I know that's more than one, but don't make me choose. **– TheStarbuck86x via Discord**

I'm a big ol' indie game fan, but how can I say anything but Tears of the Kingdom? The Legend of Zelda on the NES is the first video game I remember playing, and I've loved the series ever since. **– troytlepower via Discord**

## READERS' TOP ANTICIPATED GAMES

We received way too many responses to include, but here are the top 10 answers we received from the hundreds of responses from our community:

1. Marvel's Spider-Man 2
2. The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom
3. Hogwarts Legacy
4. Resident Evil 4
5. Starfield
6. Final Fantasy XVI
7. Star Wars Jedi: Survivor
8. Diablo IV
9. Dead Space
10. Hollow Knight: Silksong

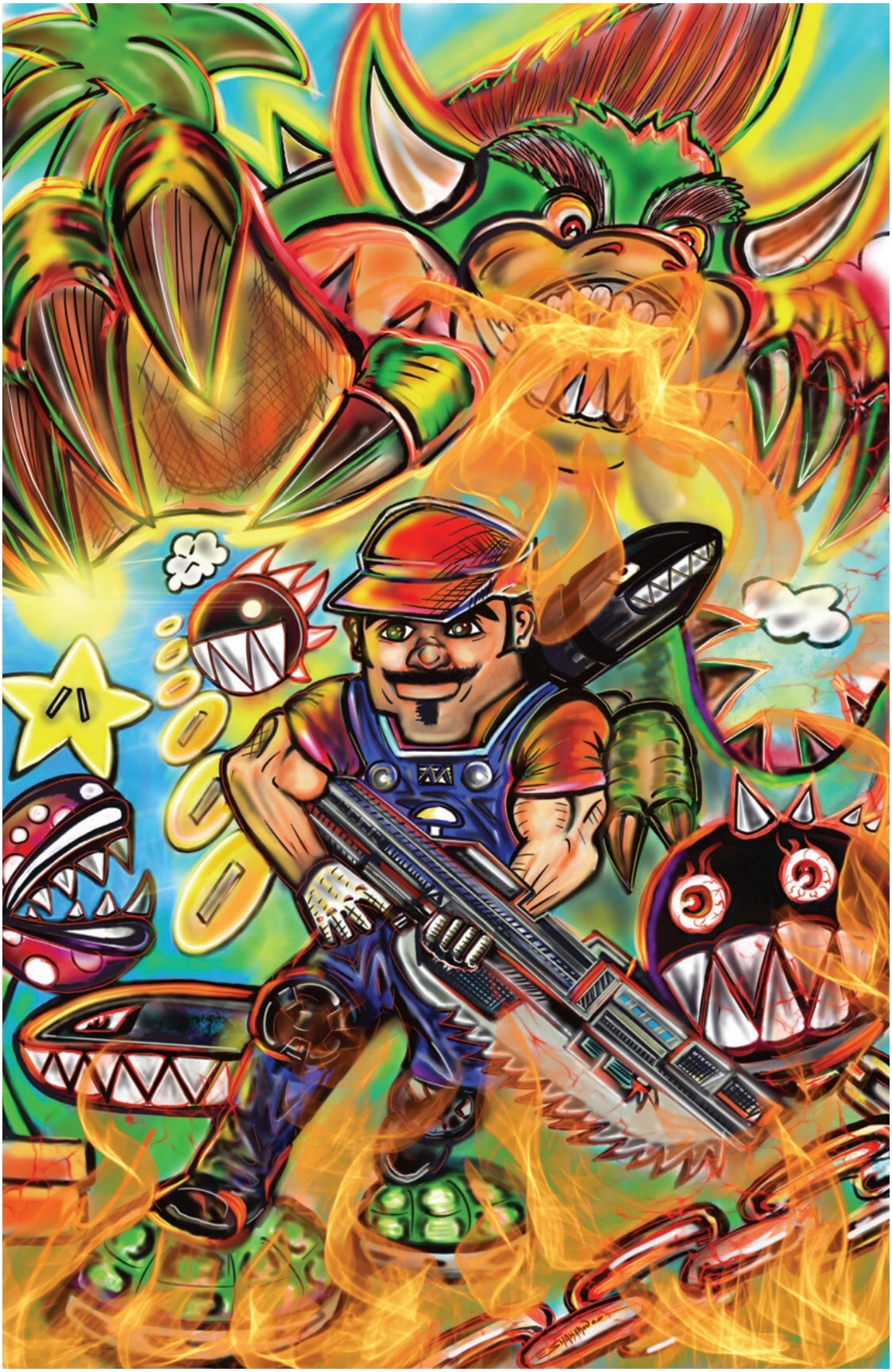


*Reader art submission: Deion Navarro*

## GETTING A FOOT IN THE DOOR

What path did your writers take to get into video game journalism and the video game industry in general? **– via Instagram**

↳ *This is probably our most frequently asked question, and unfortunately, we don't have a great, one-size-fits-all answer. For some, the path included writing for smaller blogs on the side of other full-time jobs, while others pursued the career as freelancers before making the jump to full-time status at* Game Informer. *Others started in adjacent industries before switching to the game press or through an industry internship. Though most of* Game Informer*'s staff arrived via different means, our lifelong love of gaming and the desire to spread the word about our favorite experiences are the unifying factors.* ■



*Reader art winner: Ed Shakarov*

↘

**Submit your art for a chance to win a prize!**

Please include your name and email address. Submissions may be showcased in our magazine and/or on social media, and become the property of *Game Informer*. Email to: ReaderArt@GameInformer.com

2022

# THE YEAR IN REVIEW

## Adaptations, acquisitions, and adventure in the lands between

In 2022, games were delayed, deals were made, and award speeches were interrupted. It can be challenging to keep track of all the headlines in a year as eventful as this one, so we gathered the biggest stories for our yearly recap. Here's everything you need to know about the games industry in 2022.

**BY CHARLES HARTE**

### DEVELOPMENT DELAYS AND SUPPLY CHAIN SETBACKS

As technology advances and games get larger, development cycles have become longer and more complicated. Delays are common, but the number of high-profile delays in 2022 caught many off-guard.

Even when games did come out, many still struggled to buy a new console to play them on. 2020's worldwide lockdown and supply chain issues have continued, and the game industry is no exception. Two years after their launch, the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X are still difficult to find. Online retailers have implemented precautions to prevent scalpers from buying them in bulk, but they are still not readily available. Meanwhile, the Nintendo Switch and Xbox Series S have largely overcome the shortage, thanks to their simpler hardware.

Despite these issues, 2022 was the year Valve's Steam Deck became available to the public. While the device was originally only available through online reservations with month-long wait times, Valve eliminated that system in October. Though the battery life is limited and the hardware capabilities don't compare to that of a high-end PC, the Steam Deck has been a success, bringing a vast catalog of games to a new, portable format.

### CASH OF THE TITANS

In January 2022, Microsoft announced its proposed acquisition of gaming giant Activision Blizzard for nearly $69 billion. If it goes through, it will be the largest purchase in video game history, but that remains a big "if." Since its announcement, the deal has gone through its fair share of controversies and legal issues.

Activision Blizzard owns some of the biggest properties on the market right now, including Overwatch, Warcraft, Diablo, Candy Crush, and, most notably, Call of Duty. If Microsoft gained the rights to all of these games, they would theoretically have the power to make them console exclusives, which many argue would give them an unfair advantage in the marketplace. To assuage those fears, Microsoft has repeatedly stated it would not tie Call of Duty to the Xbox and even proposed deals with Sony and Nintendo that would grant them a decade of guaranteed releases. Still, Sony opposes the acquisition.

The deal is also under scrutiny from governments around the world, and the American Federal Trade Commission (FTC) announced its intention to block the deal last December. The FTC's decision states the merger would give the companies control over too much of the industry; Microsoft would have massive influence over the console gaming, cloud gaming, and mobile gaming markets. Microsoft then claimed the FTC's opposition was unconstitutional but has since walked that statement back. Only time will tell if the deal ends up going through.

### NOTABLE DELAYS

- Starfield
- Redfall
- The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom
- Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League
- Forspoken
- Skull and Bones
- Hogwarts Legacy
- Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp

### FROM THE HOME SCREEN TO THE BIG SCREEN

2022 was a massive year for video game film adaptations. They weren't all hits, but the sheer quantity is encouraging for anyone hoping their favorite game will be turned into a movie or show one day.

In February, Tom Holland and Mark Wahlberg starred in *Uncharted*, a prequel to Naughty Dog's action franchise. *Sonic the Hedgehog 2* was released later in the summer. The film introduced Idris Elba as Knuckles and Colleen O'Shaughnessey reprised her role as Tails from the video games. Both movies did fairly well at the box office, and are currently the fourth *(Sonic 2)* and fifth *(Uncharted)* highest-grossing video game movies of all time. We also got a few trailers for *The Super Mario Bros. Movie*, though reception to Chris Pratt's voice for Mario has been mixed at best.

It was an even bigger year for TV adaptations; *The Cuphead Show*, *Dragon Age: Absolution, Resident Evil, Sonic Prime,* and *Halo* were all released on streaming services this year. But none received as much praise as the anime series *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners*. We also got a few glimpses of HBO's *The Last of Us* (which you can read more about on page 18), even though it didn't begin airing until early 2023.

### *TARNISHED TAKEOVER*

Lots of fantastic games were released (and you can read all about them starting on page 38), but it would be impossible to talk about 2022 without mentioning Elden Ring. A spiritual successor to From Software's popular Dark Souls games, Elden Ring took the world by storm, becoming one of the best-selling games of the year. It also received near-universal critical acclaim, with perfect scores from dozens of media outlets, *Game Informer* included.

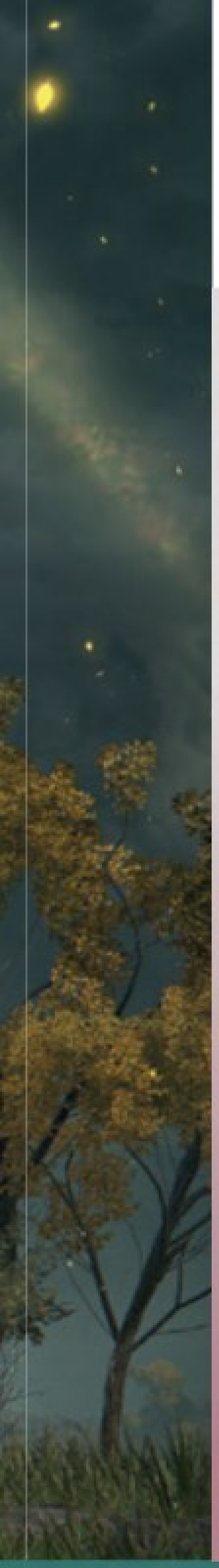
This level of popularity wasn't entirely unexpected – Elden Ring did win "Most Anticipated Game" at The Game Awards in 2020 and 2021 – but surprising was how wide that popularity spread. Elden Ring is known as the most flexible, approachable From Software title to date, and its open world was able to suck new players in at an incredible rate.

Even now, nearly a year after its release, Elden Ring's impact on gaming culture is pervasive and persistent. SteamDB, a site that measures the active player count of games on Steam, almost always has the game listed in its top 15 nearly a year after release. It introduced the term "maidenless" into the internet vernacular, and streamers and speedrunners are hard at work crafting new, increasingly complex ways to beat the game. Twitch streamer MissMikkaa recently beat a modded version of the game where she played two versions simultaneously; one controlled with a controller, the other with a dance pad.

Seeing so much of the gaming community celebrate a single game with this much passion is a rare and joyful event. And when we look back on 2022 a decade from now, it will be impossible to ignore Elden Ring's impact.

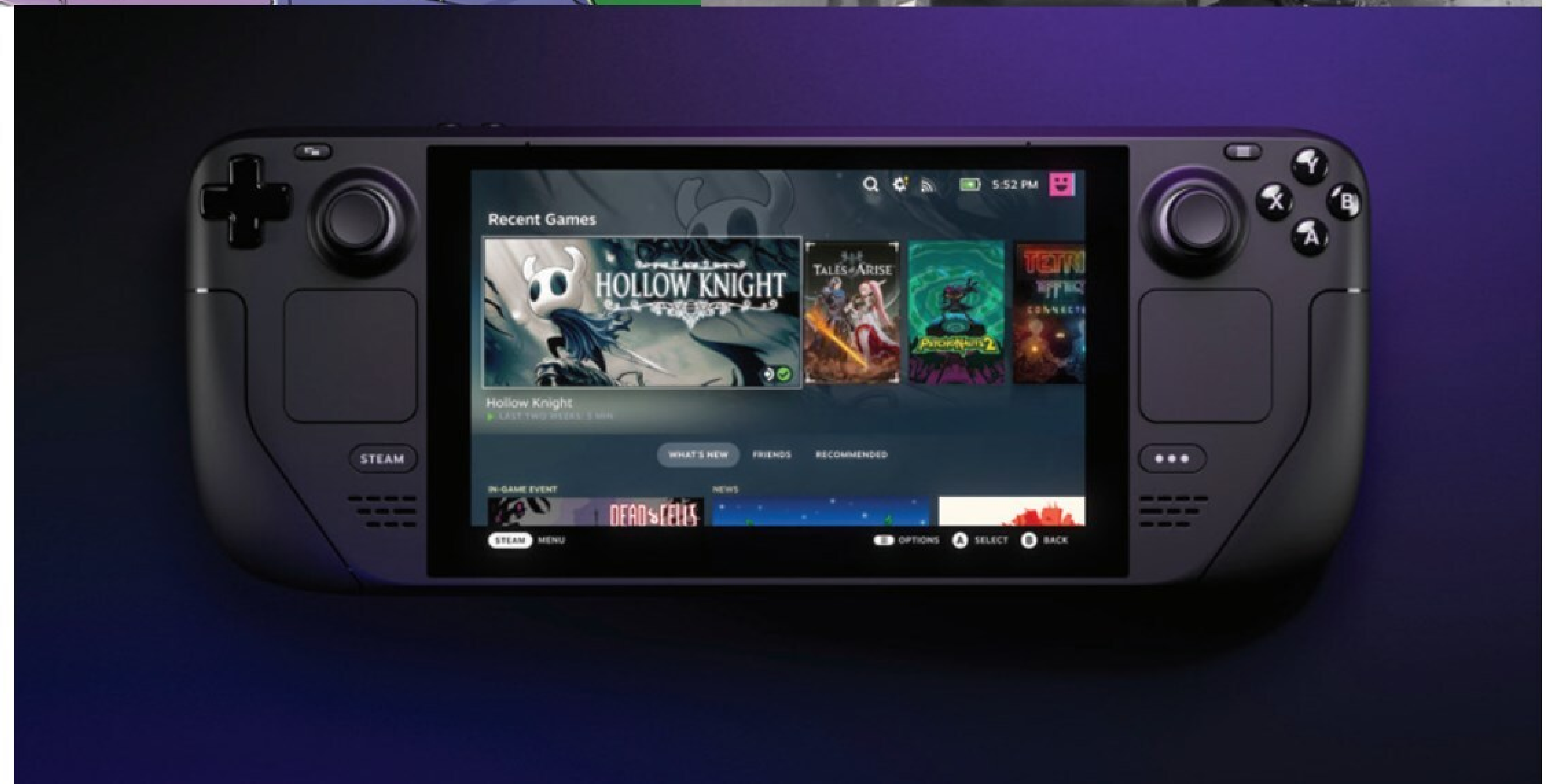
### *WHAT WILL WE SEE IN 2023?*

2022 set up a lot of expectations for 2023. With so many high-profile games pushed into next year, we know what many of the biggest hits are likely to be. We know Microsoft and the FTC will battle it out in court. We know Chris Pratt, Jack Black, and Charlie Day will star in the first Mario movie since the '90s. Still, there are so many questions. Will Starfield and Zelda be any good? Will Microsoft's massive merger malfunction? Will Wario, voiced by Danny Devito, appear in a post-credits scene after the Mario movie? Maybe! We'll have to wait and see. ■



## MORE BIG NEWS FROM 2022

- Stadia sputters out, shutting down next year
- PS Plus adds new tiers to compete with Game Pass
- E3 is canceled for the third consecutive year and vows to return in 2023
- Workers at ZeniMax form Microsoft's first union in the US
- Teenage hacker leaks an early build of Grand Theft Auto 6, gets arrested by British police
- Elden Ring's Game Awards speech is interrupted by a kid who dedicates the award to Bill Clinton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# Three Days In Tokyo With The Creators Of Slitterhead

## The ever-changing face of the biggest city in the world

**BY BLAKE HESTER**

**WE RECENTLY SPENT A WEEK IN TOKYO** and visited with Bokeh Game Studio, the newly independent developer behind the upcoming game Slitterhead. We spent time with Keiichiro Toyama, the creator of Silent Hill, Siren, and Gravity Rush, Miki Takahashi, an artist known for the Siren series, and Akira Yamaoka, the famed composer behind Silent Hill, *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners*, and more.

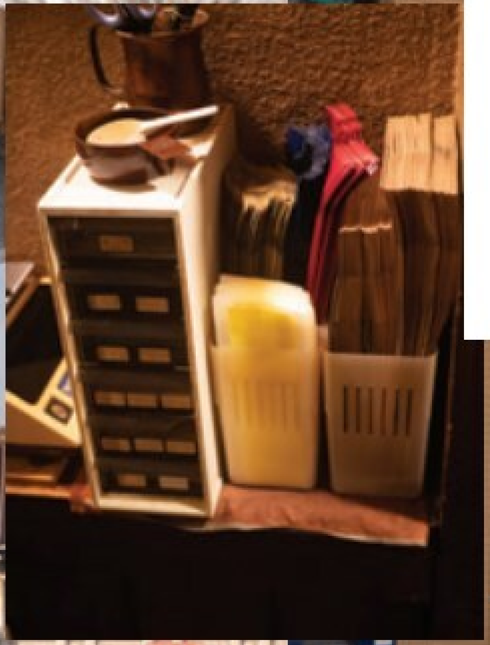
We wanted to know how where they live affects what they make. Throughout multiple parts of Tokyo, we got various answers about the city's changing face, what they love and miss, and how decades of living here has made its way into their works. ■

*Across these two pages are select quotes at the heart of each developers thoughts on those topics. If you want to read the entire longform feature about Bokeh, head over to GameInformer.com/Bokeh-Tokyo-Tour*

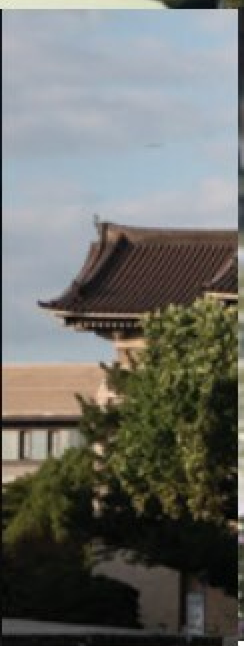
Times
P →
カプセル・イン
ミヤコ

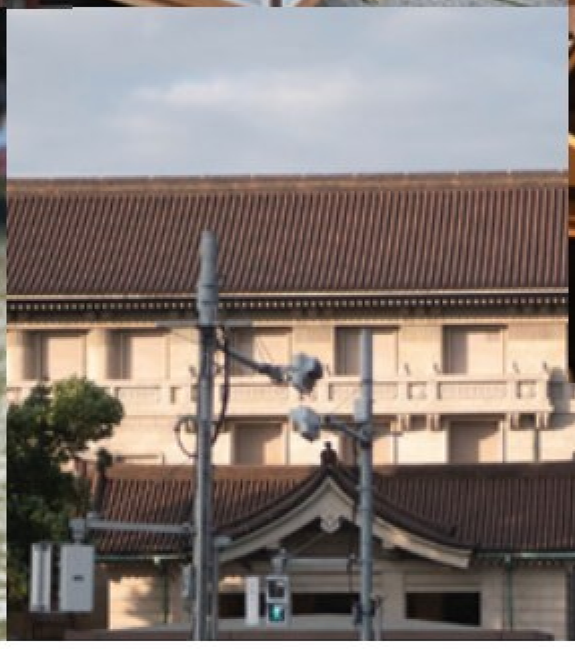
"I think Tokyo is a place that always keeps changing. But it also leaves something for us to be attached to. It's giving us good memories, and then it's going off to the next stage."
– Keiichiro Toyama

"I do love the old, and I do love these places. But I'm not against evolution and things changing. [...] But there's a shared feeling of people in Tokyo that they do miss the old. I think it's important for us to keep that to our hearts."
– Keiichiro Toyama

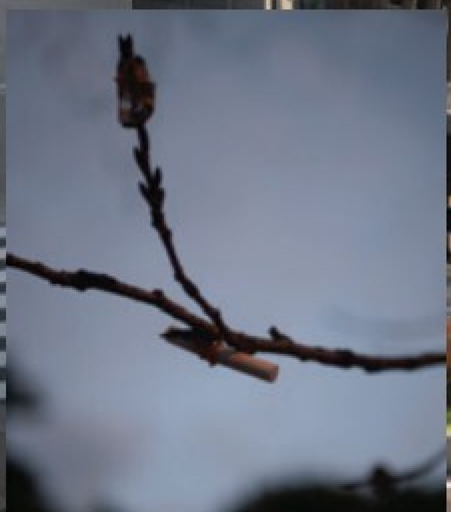


“You know, when you think about older artists, writers, and researchers from the past, their rooms were always disorganized and messy. I get the feeling that being disorganized like that – that’s where creativity springs from. That’s how things are created. But Tokyo, it’s too clean, you know? It’s not interesting to see or to live in. Jinbōchō and Kudanshita have changed a lot too, but something of that less orderly past remains in them. That’s the feeling I get here.”
– Akira Yamaoka





“You can see old art and new art together at once in Tokyo. That’s an extremely attractive thing to me. Also, despite how many people there are in Tokyo, you can still find quiet spaces to yourself here. I think it’s a highly individualistic place, Tokyo. People don’t meddle or interfere with you here. For a creative person that’s a great thing. It’s a very comfortable place for artists.”
– Miki Takahashi



“There’s a part of me that thinks it’s really unfortunate. But it’s also like, what can you do? It’s a city, after all, and cities change.”
– Akira Yamaoka

# Professor Layton And The Mysteries Of The Universe

How Professor Layton led me to a career in astrophysics **BY CHLOE LIEBENTHAL**

**I WAS SEVEN YEARS OLD,** sitting in the backseat of my parents' car as they navigated through a Costco parking lot, when I handed my mom my pastel pink Nintendo DS Lite and changed the trajectory of my life. I didn't realize asking her for help with a tricky puzzle in Professor Layton and the Curious Village would get her instantly hooked on the game or that spending the next few years bonding over our shared love of the series would eventually lead to me becoming an astrophysicist. All I knew was I couldn't find the hidden arrow that would solve the puzzle.

As I look back now, I see that the series' gameplay instilled a sense of curiosity that has stuck with me since childhood. But at the time, I only saw the puzzle as an obstacle standing between me and the next twist in the game's charming detective story. As I hoped, my mom easily spotted the arrow, and as soon as Layton himself appeared on the DS screen and struck his iconic puzzle-solving pose, she was as captivated as me. For the next few years, my mom and I were faithful followers of our favorite shared series. She'd enjoy the latest game while I was at school, and I'd play after I got home and finished my homework. When the games first came out, I was too young for most of the puzzles to be intuitive, but I'd spend hours filling up sheets of scratch paper as I tried to untangle their latest riddle. As Layton's catchphrase goes, "Every puzzle has an answer," and my unwavering dedication to those games taught me to never give up in search of that answer.

**CHLOE LIEBENTHAL**
OWLSAT Physics Specialist at Rice University

By the time I was first exposed to high school physics, the Professor Layton series had mostly run its course. The series' original "puzzle master," Japanese psychologist Akira Tago, passed away in 2016, and although developer Level-5 continued the series after his death, my mom and I felt the gameplay was never the same. However, my puzzle-solving drive was as strong as ever. I was already interested in science, but my very first physics class came with a surprising realization. When I found the solution to a simple problem – the speed of a box sliding on a frictionless surface – I felt a sense of proud discovery I hadn't felt since the last Professor Layton I really enjoyed, the Azran Legacy. It was as though I'd just solved a puzzle with my old friends Layton and Luke, and I threw myself into learning as much as I could about the subject.

Soon, I wasn't just content familiarizing myself with the material physicists had already established. That instinctual sense of curiosity pulled me towards astrophysics research – or, as I see it, the greatest and most mysterious puzzles of all. I worked hard, continuing my education, and jumped at the first opportunity to get involved with research. Since then, I've co-authored multiple physics papers, taken every opportunity to learn from and collaborate with experts at NASA, and am currently working on launching a satellite containing scientific instruments into Earth's orbit. Every day, I look forward to learning more.

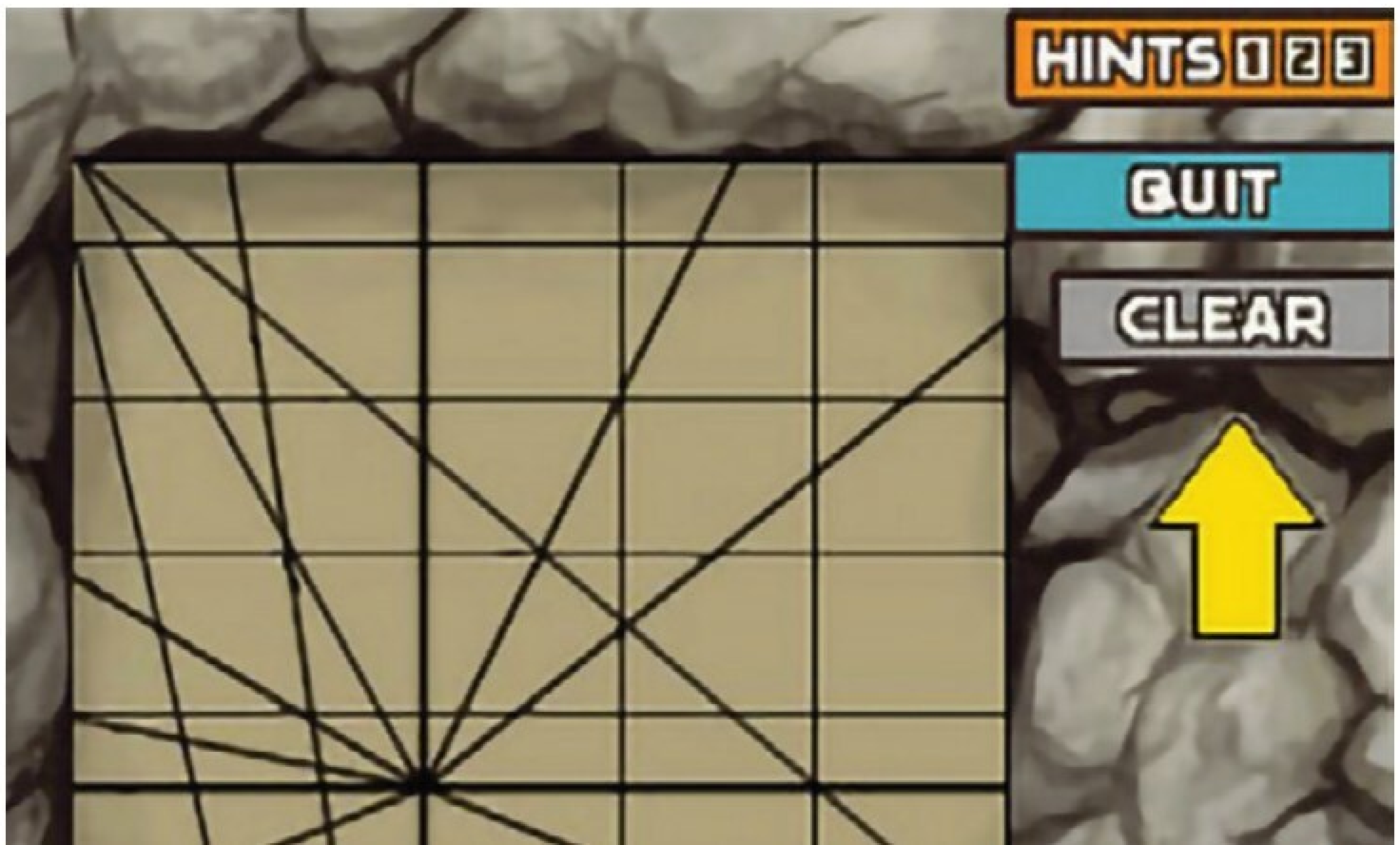
↓ Professor Layton and the Azran Legacy

Humanity's understanding of the cosmos around us has made incredible leaps forward in recent memory, but it seems every time we learn something new about the world, it raises even more questions. Far from the carefully-written brain teasers that occupied my time as a kid, the questions I face as an astrophysicist are abstract and rarely have straightforward answers. Rather than attempting to find one singular, correct solution, I search for answers that best approximate the vast and impossibly complex physical world. Often, figuring out the right question is a puzzle itself. What's remained the same is the underlying sense of discovery.

A lot of my current research deals with weather outside our atmosphere and NASA satellites collecting data in space. Astronomers have understood the Sun's plasma emissions (known as solar wind) are related to phenomena such as auroras and geomagnetic storms since the 19th century, but that doesn't mean the mysteries of space weather are solved. Magnetic reconnection, a major process driving solar wind dynamics in Earth's magnetosphere, has only been directly recorded in the last ten years. What other mysterious solar dynamics affect the space weather around Earth? How can we predict geomagnetic storms early enough to minimize their damage? Any answer will raise more questions as physicists build our understanding of the world to probe further into the unknown. To me, the most captivating puzzles are the ones that can never be solved and filed away as known quantities, but instead continue to grow and change along with the people searching for answers.

With the 2020 news that Level-5 is shutting down its North American operations, I've come to terms with the reality that the series that shaped my life will probably stay in the past. However, my love of puzzles lives on through my career in astrophysics. Real science is vastly more complex than even the trickiest Professor Layton puzzle, but I'll always be grateful to Layton and his gentlemanly ways for helping build the early sense of curiosity that led me to become who I am today. ■

↙ How quickly can you spot the hidden arrow in this puzzle from Professor Layton and the Curious Village?



# ADAPTING THE LAST OF US TO A NEW MEDIUM

### BY KYLE HILLIARD

**PERHAPS MORE THAN ANY PROPERTY** that has moved from interactive to passive entertainment, The Last of Us seems most suited to make the change. Joel and Ellie's story is emotional and cinematic and does not rely on player choice. We spoke with some of the actors about the adaptation and Neil Druckmann, co-creator of The Last of Us, who was heavily involved in writing the show and even directed a few episodes.

Druckmann is no stranger to directing actors, even if the recording process of a TV show is different from how it works in a video game. "There is a certain luxury we have in video games that when we capture a performance, we have every camera angle under the sun. We don't have to worry about coverage because we have all the coverage in the world," Druckmann said in a round-table interview about working on the show. The camera can move, the clothes can change, and even the setting and weather can be changed in a scene.

Television is a much more planned-out process. You make your decisions ahead of time, make sure they're exactly how you want, and hope for the best. "What happens is you have all these different departments: the actors, the costumes – everything has

to come together for this moment where you say, 'Action!' And you hold your breath and hope all the pieces come together," Druckmann says. "When it does work, it's this high. It's a thrill. It feels like a high-wire circus act."

For Druckmann, though, the whole process felt very familiar. "Giving art direction is giving art direction, except you're doing it in real life instead of on a screen," he says of the surprising and unsurprising similarities. "Working with actors is working with actors. Writing it is a lot of the same conversations – just trying to make it authentic and honest."

Druckmann enjoyed the process of directing television and working on the adaptation of his work, but video games are where his heart lies. "I love all forms of storytelling. At this point, I've gotten to do a little bit in comics, a lot in video games, and a little bit in TV, and I think there is always something to learn from all of them and help improve all of them by having a better understanding," Druckmann says. "My love for games will never go away, but this was a thrilling experience."

The show is a faithful adaptation of the source material, but with additional added context to establish the world and the chance to spend more time with characters we may have only met briefly in the game. Despite staying close to the original game, there is still room to play for the actors.

We spoke with Pedro Pascal about playing Joel in the show and specifically learned how he approached the accent. It is pared back for the TV show compared to Troy Baker's more southern-flavored voice. "I think it was more a matter of kind of composing a quality amongst many other ones. It was all of these different pieces that were part of a puzzle," Pascal told us. "Joel's from Austin, so a thick Texas accent isn't technically applicable. I grew up in San Antonio. Before I was two years old, my family landed in San Antonio, and I lived there until I was nearly 12 years old. It was more a matter of playing with what's in my system already. What's a sound that shapes the words that are on the page? What harkens to something that is from the game that is familiar to us already? What is the music of it all? A bit of a twang was definitely part of it."

Gabriel Luna is playing Joel's brother in the show, Tommy. Speaking with Luna, he expressed his adoration for the games, revealing he collected every trading card and artifact in The Last of Us Part II. He was eager to jump into the remake of The Last of Us when Druckmann gifted him a download code – though he did give up on his permadeath run quickly. Luna is an early highlight in the show, expressing intelligence and compassion with little dialogue. When Joel loses Sarah in the first episode, all Luna's Tommy does is say Joel's name and expresses both remorse and the need to move forward because they are in danger. "That was really a rough one that night," Luna says about shooting that devastating sequence. "I was both looking forward to and dreading that scene. That was a big one."

The cast reveres the source material, but only one performer has the privilege of playing the same character in the video game and the show. Merle Dandridge can now boast that she played Marlene in The Last of Us Part I and its sequel, and *The Last of Us* TV show. Despite knowing Marlene well, Dandridge equated playing her on-screen to getting the hang of a new clutch. "I had never stepped into her shoes outside of a mocap suit," Dandridge says. "I had never worn a wig as her in front of a camera before. I had certainly never physically walked around in that clothing. It took a moment for it to feel like second nature." It didn't take long to get acclimated, and Dandridge appreciated the opportunity to explore Marlene even more. "We've left canon, and we get to see her go off and do different things you probably already know about her – but it's a delight to see her walk it out." ■

*If you're interested in checking the series out, you're in luck –* The Last of Us *has already begun airing on HBO*

# PLAYING IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

## How video games are waking up to the climate emergency

**BY ALEX AVARD**

**THE END OF THE WORLD** is hardly new ground for video games. Most of the time, it's a starting point, fertile soil for cultivating rich narratives, cathartic power fantasies, and generous amounts of audiovisual spectacle. Considering that, you'd think games would be comfortable grappling with the reality of the climate crisis, a planetary emergency the United Nations has described as "the largest, most pervasive threat to the natural environment that the world has ever experienced."

Yet despite our awareness of human-induced climate change predating even the origins of video games, the medium has a poor track record of exploring what it means to live in a world undergoing profound changes to its biosphere. Instead, their messages tend to perpetuate the same self-delusion that led us into crisis in the first place; namely, the idea that we can exploit the Earth's resources for our own gain with total abandon and suffer few consequences.

Whether we're building cities, commanding conquest, battling for a victory royale, or simply crafting to survive, developers have given us digital trees to cut down, virtual animals to hunt, and natural resources to plunder at will, perpetuating the illusion that humans hold ultimate dominion over nature. In recent years, however, as the impact of climate change casts an ever larger shadow over our cultures, societies, and livelihoods, more video games are stepping up to face the reality of the crisis, from ambitious indies willing to explore inconvenient truths, to live-service blockbusters offering players a chance to bring about real-world change through in-game achievements.

## BEYOND GAME OVER

Games have always been effective at transporting us to new worlds. But many are now starting to return the focus to our own, conjuring up future visions of what Earth might look like should humanity continue down the path of planetary warming. In doing so, these games help close the psychological gap between what players rationally understand about climate change (rising temperatures, melting ice caps, etc.) and what they can viscerally comprehend (the raw emotional response to experiencing the impact of the crisis firsthand).

After Us, the second title from Spanish developer Piccolo Studio, looks set to emotionally wallop players with just as many gut punches as the team's previous effort, Arise: A Simple Story, but for very different reasons. As Gaia, the personified spirit of life, players traverse a bleak and hostile post-apocalypse, seeking to liberate the shackled souls of fauna that have succumbed to human exploitation, all while avoiding the ire of oil-drenched monstrosities known as The Devourers.

Blending real-world imagery with environmental mysticism (the main character's name is possibly a nod to Gaianism and other Earth religions, which qualify the planet in spiritual terms), After Us evokes an ethereal quality highlighting the delicate fragility of our ecosystem. Going by its title, the game also acknowledges the prospect that, one way or another, Earth will eventually recover from the impact of climate change, regardless of whether humanity is still around to help or not.

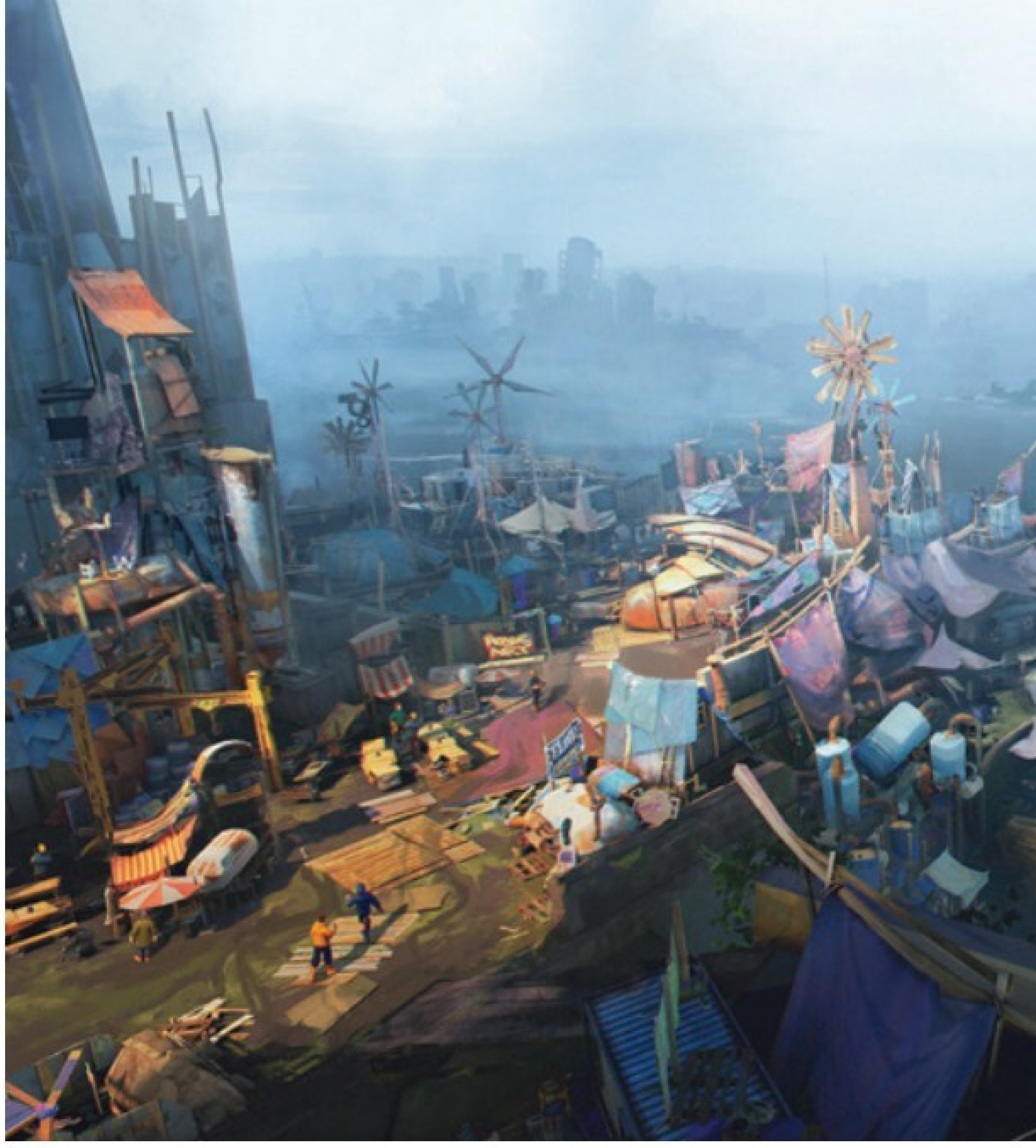
After Us' brand of climate fiction (or "cli-fi") holds a personal, emotive focus. But many, such as last year's Floodland, adopt a macro perspective in addressing what is ultimately a very macro problem. Set on a future Earth rendered archipelagic by rising sea levels, Floodland brings a new spin to the city-builder by asking players to lead the last vestiges of humanity as they emerge from the devastation of global warming.

Instead of offering players a green and pleasant canvas to develop upon (as is the norm in most city-builders), Floodland sets its stage across an unpleasant patchwork of polluted islands, bogs, and oceans. Humanity's culpability is evident wherever you look, from the mountains of waste that become a common resource for your tribe's operations, to the dilapidated skyscrapers which stand like towering gravestones for a culture that knowingly poisoned itself to death.

Floodland uses a worst-case scenario (10 to 15 meters of sea level rise) as the basis for its setting, joining a growing list of cli-fi titles presenting cautionary fables of a dystopian future. But these games needn't limit their stories exclusively to tales of the apocalyptic. Part of the value of art as a tool for social progress is in its ability to inspire and empower; more specifically, its messages can offer valuable counternarratives to the climate doomism that scares people away from engaging with the crisis at all.

One promising, under-utilized space for cli-fi narratives is solarpunk, a sci-fi genre that imagines what society might look like after abandoning its addiction to fossil fuels entirely for clean and renewable energy. It may only appear briefly during the game's tutorial, but Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart's Megalopolis is a good example of this; a bright, beaming utopia of sustainable urban living, one that appears to be operating in harmony with nature, rather than actively fighting against it.

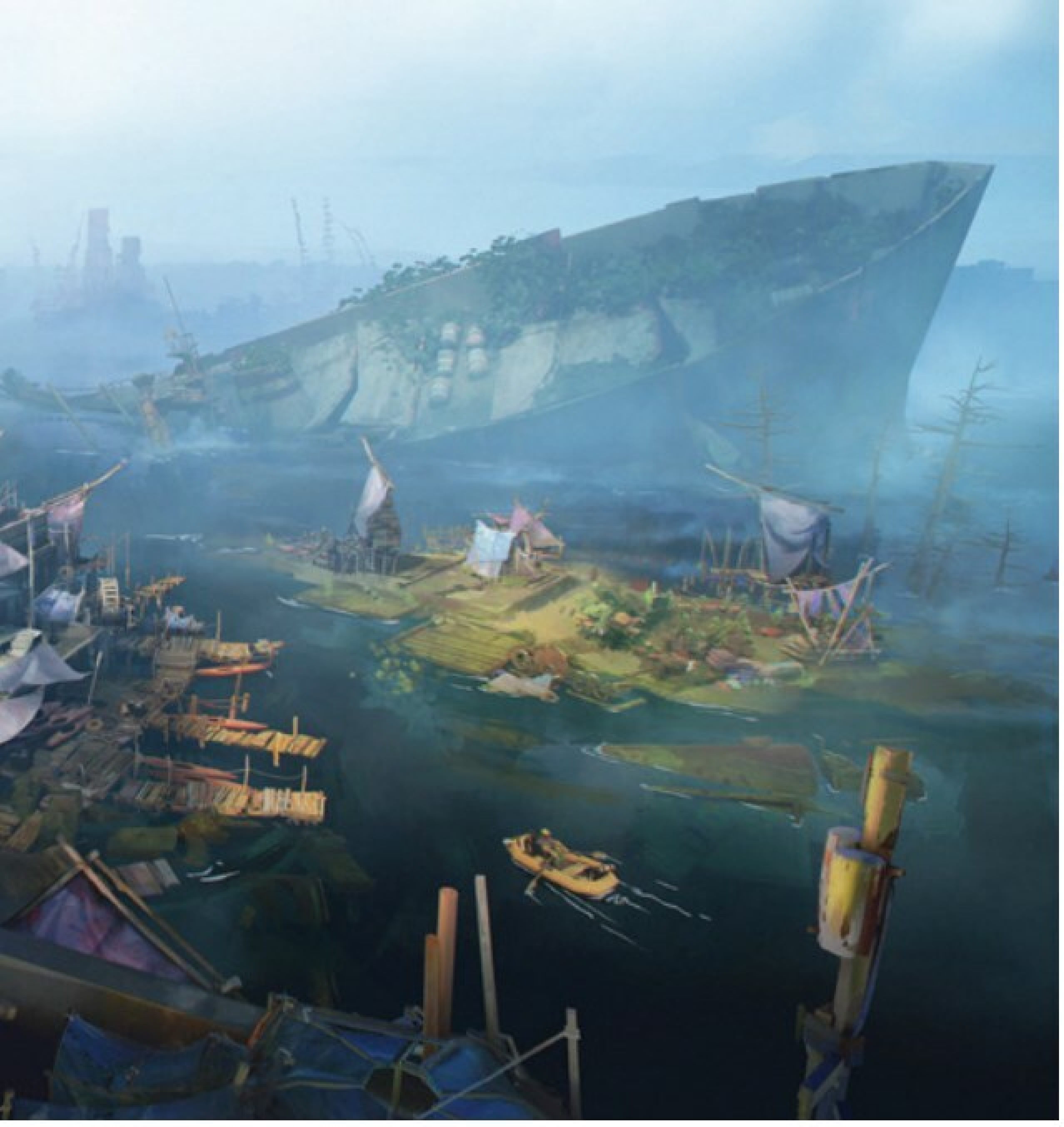
While certainly superlative, such scenery offers a powerful image of a future worth fighting for. These hopeful visions are just as important for changing perceptions and behavior around climate change as the dystopian nightmares that have already acted as an alarm wake-up call for so many. With their ability to immerse players in worlds and stories, not to mention the huge reach they hold with global audiences, games are positioned to be a key vehicle for communicating such visions, empowering entire generations to forge ahead for a better world even when present circumstances may signal cause for defeat.



## GAMES FOR CHANGE

While independent games are at the vanguard of bringing climate fiction to the forefront of interactive entertainment, the rest of the industry is at least starting to catch up. Much of this effort has manifested in the form of "Green Activations," or in-game events hosted within an existing title to engage an established player base in collective climate action.

Many were developed in conjunction with the Big Green Jam, an annual competition held as part of the United Nations' Playing for the Planet initiative,



which works to mobilize the game industry towards greater environmental action. For 2022's Big Green Jam, and as part of its broader push to market Horizon Forbidden West as a cli-fi parable, PlayStation committed to planting a tree for every player who received a specific trophy in Guerilla's open-world sequel within a limited timeframe. That might sound like a modest gesture on Sony's part, especially given the way corporations contribute to climate change (in 2019, *The Verge*, while investigating the PlayStation 4, said the machine "leaves an indelible, measurable stain on Earth and its atmosphere"). But it does, at least, reflect a cultural shift within the industry. Even its biggest titans are now considering how they can use their platform to spark engagement on environmental issues.

Elsewhere, however, big-budget titles have stumbled in their treatment of the crisis. Battlefield 2042 took scientists' somber predictions of an altered Earth as the basis for its noisy multiplayer sandbox, which offers little space to give players pause for thought about what kind of world they're fighting over. This trivialization speaks to an industry that has yet to reckon with the true urgency of the crisis fully. Gaming's ongoing flirtations with emerging technology such as cloud streaming, cryptocurrency, and the blockchain (all hugely energy-intensive platforms), in particular, threaten to undermine any of the positive contributions it may be making towards sustainable play elsewhere.

In short, the industry needs to have some uncomfortable conversations going forward about how it can address its carbon footprint and become an ally to the climate movement while also building resilience to sustain itself in a changing world. It's no small task, but one that can start at its creative center, with the stories, worlds, and ideas that shift perceptions and spark behavioral change at scale.

## FUTURE OF PLAY

The Anthropocene is a term many scientists have begun using to acknowledge a new geological period for our planet, one defined by the immense impact of human activity on its climate and ecosystem. That impact is all-encompassing, and as it continues to encroach upon the livelihoods of every human being on the planet, we're only going to see the questions and subject matter that it raises bleed into the stories, myths, and grand narratives of our culture.

So, while a growing number of games have taken the ongoing emergency as a key inspiration for their worlds, even those that don't offer explicit commentary on the crisis still have something to add to the conversation. The reality of climate change is so big, after all, that if a game has something to say (and what game doesn't?), then it has something to say about the climate emergency. Once developers begin to understand the opportunity and responsibility of that power, we will, I hope, begin to see smarter, richer, and more illuminating forms of interactive cli-fi. Games, in other words, that act as a genuine force for good in the global struggle toward a brighter future for our planet. ■

# THE BEST BOARD GAMES OF 2022

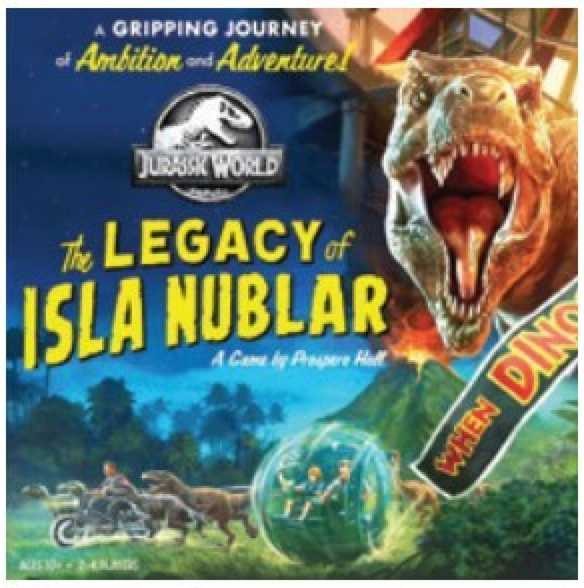
BY MATT MILLER

2022 brought an array of incredible tabletop games, showing the ever-expanding scope and creativity unfolding in the scene. Here are ten of the most enjoyable, including cooperative and competitive experiences, ranging from massive, sprawling adventures to simple, joyous party games and everything in between.

## Ahoy

**Publisher: Leder Games**

Leder's well-deserved reputation for asymmetrical competition has its newest success story with this swashbuckling pirate-themed adventure, which is more manageable and easier to learn than some of the team's prior efforts. Players control different smugglers, rebels, and other factions as the sea gradually opens up to exploration. Everyone tries to control regions and battle one another until there is only one true lord of the seas.


A GRIPPING JOURNEY of Ambition and Adventure!
JURASSIC WORLD
The LEGACY of ISLA NUBLAR
A Game by Prospero Hall
WHEN DINO

## Jurassic World: The Legacy of Isla Nublar

**Publisher: Funko Games**

Players take on a dozen distinct scenarios in this legacy adventure. Each step of the way, you're changing the nature of the (potentially doomed) island, including introducing new dinosaur species. Players are constantly managing disasters, from weather events to creature escapes. Luck plays a factor to a greater degree than in many thematic games, but dinosaur enthusiasts can find a lot to love here if they're okay with those moments of shifting expectations.

The Elder Scrolls V
SKYRIM
THE ADVENTURE GAME
Bethesda

## The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

**Publisher: Modiphius Entertainment**

More than a decade after the video game's launch, this intensely anticipated tabletop adventure game honors that legacy with a deeply faithful adaptation, capturing much of what players loved in the original Skyrim. The cooperative adventure game casts players as Blades working to protect the Empire through exploration, battles, and choices that reshape the game ahead for everyone at the table. It's a perfect pick for many long nights of adventuring together.

FROSTHAVEN

## Frosthaven

**Publisher: Cephalofair Games**

The highly anticipated sequel to 2017's Gloomhaven doesn't disappoint, featuring innovative card-based combat, impeccable world-building, and a deep progression loop. New developments enrich the gaming between adventures with more rewarding settlement development, crafting, and even seasonal events. That's on top of the dozens of unique scenarios, enemies, and items to discover. Genuinely massive, immersive, and rewarding.

KASPER LAPP
Fun Facts

## Fun Facts

**Publisher: Repos Productions**

As light party games go, Repos once again hits the mark this year with a breezy, cooperative, and approachable game that can be taught in seconds and pulled out to play with players of any experience level. A question is asked, like "How much do you enjoy making lists?" Everyone writes down a number quantifying their answer. The answers are then placed in a line, ideally in ascending order. Everyone scores together for how many responses ended up in the right place.

HEAT
PEDAL TO THE METAL
3
DAYS OF WONDER

## Heat: Pedal to the Metal

**Publisher: Days of Wonder**

Hop into your 1960s Formula racing car and find out who can hit the finish line first. Racing games are notoriously challenging to translate into the tabletop medium, but Heat manages the task with aplomb through a creative card hand management mechanic that finds players juggling gear shifting, heat build-up, stress, and managing them all through play as they try to hit each corner at high speed, always with the risk of spinning out.

My Father's Work

## My Father's Work

**Publisher: Renegade Game Studios**

You are part of a long line of mad scientists, all of whom have been conducting dubious research from your mysterious home while the nearby villagers grow increasingly (and justifiably) suspicious of your actions. Can you enact your master plan? Expect a long playthrough thanks to lengthy app-driven narratives that accompany each session. Even so, the unique theme and rewarding sense of growth over generations of a family make My Father's Work a delightful excursion to the dark side for narrative-minded players.

My Lil' Everdell

## My Lil' Everdell

**Publisher: Starling Games**

The original (but excellent) Everdell game could be intimidating for younger gamers or those with less experience at the table. My Lil' Everdell solves for that in all the ways that matter. It holds on to the tableau-building and worker placement dynamics that are so good in its larger cousin, as well as the gorgeous nature-themed art, but keeps the game length and overall complexity down so that it can be played and enjoyed by a wider audience, making it this year's best pick for family gaming.

## Namiji

**Publisher: Funforge**

Like in 2012's Tokaido, the sequel Namiji finds players moving along a static track and enjoying a beautiful Zen experience. Here, the focus is on a lovely day of fishing off the Japanese coast, enjoying the sights and experiences along the way. An innovative movement style allows players to have a choice to move quickly or take their time, while new features like grid management to represent your fishing haul add novelty. Expect a welcoming game for newcomers that is elegant enough to entertain veterans.

STAR WARS
THE CLONE WARS

## Star Wars The Clone Wars

**Publisher: Z-MAN Games**

This adaptation of the lauded Pandemic game system finds players working cooperatively in the role of Jedi Knights like Obi-Wan Kenobi and Yoda as they range out across the Republic to hold back the Separatists. In each session, you take on a familiar villain like Count Dooku or General Grievous, and balance holding back the rising threat with the need to complete missions. Attractive art, balanced gameplay, and high replayability make this a winner for franchise fans. ■

# REDESIGN
# REINVENT
# REMAKE

BY MARCUS STEWART

# CAPCOM INJECTS NEW LIFE INTO RESIDENT EVIL 4

Resident Evil 4 set the template for basically every third-person video game after it was released in 2005. Leon S. Kennedy's bloody romp through a parasite-infected Spanish village garnered universal acclaim for its deft balance of horror and action and, most of all, its revolutionary third-person over-the-shoulder gameplay. This perspective served as an epiphany for the games industry. And Resident Evil as a series has never been the same.

Resident Evil 4 was ahead of its time. It's also aged remarkably. It plays so well that Capcom has spent the last 18 years re-releasing and remastering Resident Evil 4 on nearly every platform. Depending on the hardware, it's received additional story scenarios and content, an HD graphics upgrade, motion controls, and, most recently, a first-person VR remake. Despite some aging mechanics, many fans still swear by its original blueprint, making the idea of a remake a lofty proposition.

Even so, the success of the Resident Evil 2 remake led fans to believe a similar overhaul of the fourth game was a foregone conclusion. However, even Capcom initially hesitated about fiddling with Resident Evil 4's legendary formula. Transforming clunky PS1 titles into more palatable experiences is an easy sell, but could it get away with rebuilding a game that, while nearly two decades old itself, many still consider the peak of action survival horror? Should a Resident Evil 4 remake take the same gargantuan leap forward as its predecessors, or would that compromise the elements that made it beloved in the first place?

According to Capcom, answering this conundrum was surprisingly simple: less is more. Instead of completely re-sculpting the experience as it had with RE2, the developer-publisher instead aims to largely preserve Resident Evil 4's core design and features, dialing them up to 11 while applying a thick coat of modernization. The scares have been amplified, the gunplay feels better than ever, and it all looks gorgeous, thanks to the power of the RE Engine – which first premiered in Resident Evil 7: Biohazard and has now been used in games such as Devil May Cry 5, the upcoming Street Fighter 6, and more. New features emphasizing increased player choice and flexibility enhance the experience, and exciting surprises await veterans who know the adventure inside and out. After spending time playing, the result is a remake that feels equipped in delivering the definitive version of one of the best games ever made.

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**PLATFORM** PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • PC
**STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Capcom **DEVELOPER** Capcom
**RELEASE** March 24

## AN INTIMIDATING LEGACY

After launching the Resident Evil 3 remake in 2020, Capcom decided Resident Evil 4 would be the next entry to get a modern facelift. Capcom tasked Resident Evil 2 remake directors Yasuhiro Ampo and Kazunori Kadoi with the unenviable assignment. The pair's 2019 revision of the 1998 sequel earned heaps of praise, and some consider it one of the best games of the previous generation. But Resident Evil 4 is a different animal, and the pressure was immense.

"Honestly speaking, I didn't want to do it, says Ampo. "The bar is just set so high. Among the RE series and even games in general, the original RE4

has become a legend. I knew that it would be difficult to successfully remake it, and if we made one mistake with any updates we made, we would anger its fans."

After replaying Resident Evil 4 and collecting the team's opinions, the elements ripe for improvement began popping out, and the two felt confident they could do the game justice.

They also honed in on the design pillars they personally loved about the game – principles they believed were responsible for its sustained popularity: fun replayability and the flexibility to enjoy the game in different ways. I played Chapters one and five, sampling Leon's gameplay and understanding how this approach shapes up. In chapter one, Leon is still alone, and in chapter five, he cooperates with Ashley Graham – the president's daughter.

## REINVENTING FUNDAMENTALS

Chapter One begins with Leon trekking through an eerily moonlit forest path leading to a remote village in rural Spain. Now a military-trained government agent, he's on a mission to locate Ashley, who's believed to be held captive somewhere in the area by a sinister group for an unknown purpose. Veterans can expect to relive the same general narrative beats, though the plot unfolds within the revamped continuity of the previous remakes. Capcom says the story has a few new twists it won't specify but is mainly faithful to the original.

Capcom has previously showcased portions of this opening section, but it's hard to get a sense of Resident Evil 4's improvements by only watching. Controls feel identical to the previous Resident Evil remakes, meaning it's substantially better and feels like a contemporary third-person shooter – it's nice to have Leon move while shooting. Producer Yoshiaki Hirabayashi guided us through this section and revealed that Resident Evil 4 features six different control schemes, including one styled after the 2005 configuration for fans seeking a more familiar experience. While a nice touch, I'm more than okay with sticking with the improved setup.

I enter the first cabin, where the original game begins. There are more rooms and items to uncover, such as ammo, hidden herbs, and even locks requiring keys. The cabin is also much spookier, giving me my first taste of the game's darker atmosphere. Though the tone feels more oppressive, Leon's cornball attitude remains intact. Expect quips such as "bill me for the repairs later" to help cut some tension.

I soon come face to face with the first Ganado, one of the many villagers whose bodies are hijacked by Las Plagas, a parasitic creature granting increased strength, durability, and other freaky tricks. His neck sits snapped to its side, making his head rest on his shoulder at a gruesome angle. This visual isn't just a horrific touch; Capcom calls this out as an example of how it uses gameplay to achieve greater narrative cohesion or, in layperson's terms, visual hints contributing to world-building. A broken neck is a telltale sign that a Ganado is in the later stage of infection. That means it's not only stronger, but you're more likely to see it perform its signature trick: ejecting a mass of pulsating flesh tentacles from the neck that can eviscerate Leon with their scythe-like appendages.

Thankfully, it doesn't come to that. Using the new quick weapon select, in which up to eight firearms, knives, and grenades can be equipped and swapped on the fly, I pull out my pistol and unload rounds. Shooting feels weightier and more impactful. The PlayStation 5 DualSense haptic feedback features add to this sensation. Targeting limbs disable them entirely, and headshots create a satisfying, albeit disturbing, crunch.

A traditional reticle replaces the pistol's laser sight from the original game. I asked Hirabayashi about this change, who explained that the team merely wanted Resident Evil 4 to fall more in line with contemporary third-person shooters. This loss is only temporary; you can acquire an attachable laser sight later in the game. Aiming still feels precise without this assist but tougher to pull off, mainly because the Ganados maneuver in a more erratic fashion than before. I waste several shots as he bobs and weaves out of harm's way before he suddenly lunges to seize me.

Though Leon can now quickly dodge away from danger, I fail and get caught. I can mash the X button to escape, but I opt for acquainting my combat knife

## WHATAYABUYIN'?

The beloved shopkeeper is back, and on top of being chattier, he offers more to players this time around. In addition to buying and selling weapons, you can now trade jewels for items such as treasure maps, yellow herbs that raise maximum health, special weapons, and mods like the laser sight. You'll also visit the Merchant to turn in sidequests.

with his throat by responding to an R2 prompt, dropping my would-be killer for good. Despite how it appears, don't expect the remake to feature many quick-time events like the original. One of Capcom's main goals from the start was to do away with these antiquated sequences while reworking some of them into more engaging forms that better fit modern gaming. Knife combat is one of the most prominent examples of this mechanical shift.

Brandishing Leon's trusty blade right before the melee attack connects triggers a parry that knocks foes back, adding a welcome layer of defense. Plus it just feels cool to execute.

"Once the parry mechanic had been implemented, from that point when I played the original, I found myself wanting to parry in the original as well," says Kadoi. "That was when I felt things became really interesting."

However, parrying comes with a cost. Taking a page from the RE2 remake, the knife now has limited durability and can break, meaning parrying is a strategic choice. You can carry multiple knives, and their sturdiness and lethality can be improved by visiting the Merchant. Parrying creates a rhythmic dance of deflecting enemies before taking a pot-shot or hitting Leon's signature roundhouse kick. It also makes knife-only runs a more exciting possibility. The team did confirm it's still feasible to beat Resident Evil 4 using only knives, a feat Kadoi claims to have pulled off.

## A TOUGH CROWD

I continue my journey to the village, fending off a few Ganados and avoiding well-hidden bear traps until I find the remains of the dog Leon has the choice to rescue in the original version. He's not so lucky this time, though Capcom coyly teases that maybe its fate isn't what it appears. I reach the village and pull out my binoculars to spy the residents milling about as one of Leon's police escorts is set ablaze on a stake in the town's center. At this point in the original, players can either charge in guns blazing or try to sneak in and pick enemies off quietly. That's still the case here, but stealth is far more viable now that Leon can crouch and move discreetly.

I take the first path on the right, creep up to an oblivious villager, and knife her down before she can react. Silently picking off foes feels good, and I opt to thin the herd as quietly as possible. That goes well until I step in plain view of an enemy, blowing my cover, and the mob descends upon me.

As I learned during my cabin encounter, the Ganados are harder to shoot, especially in groups. I can survive this onslaught without much trouble in the original, so I'm surprised at how quickly I'm surrounded and overwhelmed here. This section is intense; herding the mob into your line of fire is challenging. Their newfound unpredictability gives the Ganados an intimidating factor they haven't had in years. To cope, I take advantage of the more plentiful environmental traps, such as shooting down lanterns that burst into flames on impact. Sometimes even cows can catch fire, causing them to sprint off in a panic where they trample and ignite enemies in a wild visual.

The intensity ratchets when some fallen Ganados begin convulsing unnaturally on the ground. If you see this, you need to perform a ground execution immediately. Take too long, and they'll rise again stronger, neck snapped, and possibly sporting a

8/100
7/30
50/120
15/100
4
4
9/15
8/100

fleshy tentacle hat. Fighting through crowds to stop a single enemy from becoming a more significant threat is a devilishly fun addition forcing me to be extra mindful of everyone I drop and to ensure they were down for the count before moving on.

Eventually, the dreaded Chainsaw Man makes his menacing presence known. This tank-like enemy still absorbs a ton of bullets, and the Ganados' increased rabidness makes avoiding the wrong end of his chainsaw even more challenging. As he pursues Leon, he destroys some paths with his weapon, thus limiting your escape routes. It's here that Hirabayashi informs us that these blockades created by the Chainsaw Man persist when you revisit this village square later for a nice touch of continuity.

By the skin of my teeth, I complete this section without dying, with Leon delivering his signature "Bingo" line as my reward. Hirabayashi takes it upon himself to reload the sequence and get Leon killed so I can witness one of his many gruesome death scenes. I watch a Ganado grab Leon's head and brutally shove his thumbs through his eyes as he screams in agony and his sockets run red. Leon has several grisly new ways of meeting his demise, and they're startling motivations to stay alive whenever possible.

## ASHLEY FINDS HER FOOTING

I jump to Chapter Five, which begins shortly after Leon has retrieved Ashley. The two hide on the upper level of the village church, where a procession arrives to conduct their twisted ritual. We sneak outside, with Leon catching Ashley as she jumps down from the church window – a nod to the original. Night has fallen, and it's pouring rain, but we must make our way toward a helicopter extraction point. It's here that fans may agree that Resident Evil 4 truly begins.

Working with Ashley and keeping her out of danger is a defining element of the experience – one that was also somewhat controversial in its day. That mainly stems from some players viewing Ashley as an annoying nuisance. Capcom wants to keep the core characterization of the cast, so I can't promise you'll suddenly love Ashley if she bugged you before. I will say that her new voice actress brings her to life in a more believable fashion. In the cutscenes I witness, and in her moment-to-moment dialogue, she comes off as a little more serious, a bit less bratty, and genuinely terrified in a way that made me empathize with her plight. I never hated Ashley, but I already prefer this version of her.

By clicking the R3 button, players command Ashley to follow closely or hang further back. She can't stay put, though. Even when keeping her distance, Ashley still moves with Leon, albeit with a wider gap between them. Having Ashley trail behind keeps her out of immediate danger, but it also puts her at risk of getting scooped up and carried away by a distant enemy. That's a significant change from the original, where you could order Ashley to freeze, engendering a strategy I and likely many others exploited by regularly dumping her in a safe space to clear out enemies worry-free. Capcom wanted to negate that tactic this time around.

"Having [Ashley] go hide somewhere else defeats the purpose of having her with you", says Kadoi.

The other reason for this change is to create a greater sense of realism. Given the situation, Ashley would never want to be left alone under any circumstances, and the team even considered having the pair hold hands early in development. This attention to realism is also the inspiration behind Ashley's new suit jacket and stockings, which add to her traditional outfit. It's chilly outside, after all.

Another notable difference is Ashley no longer has a health bar. Players won't have to worry about spending precious herbs healing her since she recovers over time. It does, however, mean you need to keep a closer eye on Ashley's well-being now that it's not communicated as explicitly. Some enemies drop her with a few hits, others with only one. When Ashley absorbs too much damage, she'll enter a downed state where players must revive her by holding a button. If she's struck while injured, it's bye-bye Ashley and hello Game Over screen.

Capcom wants Ashley to feel more helpful, so it added more environmental situations requiring two heads instead of one. They can be as simple as lifting Ashley to a platform to kick down a ladder or sending her through a small crawlspace to unlock a door from the inside. You'll encounter several of these tag team-focused barriers before meeting her, providing an incentive to revisit previous areas. Capcom hopes these changes will help Ashley feel more like a natural companion and less like a second health bar to babysit.

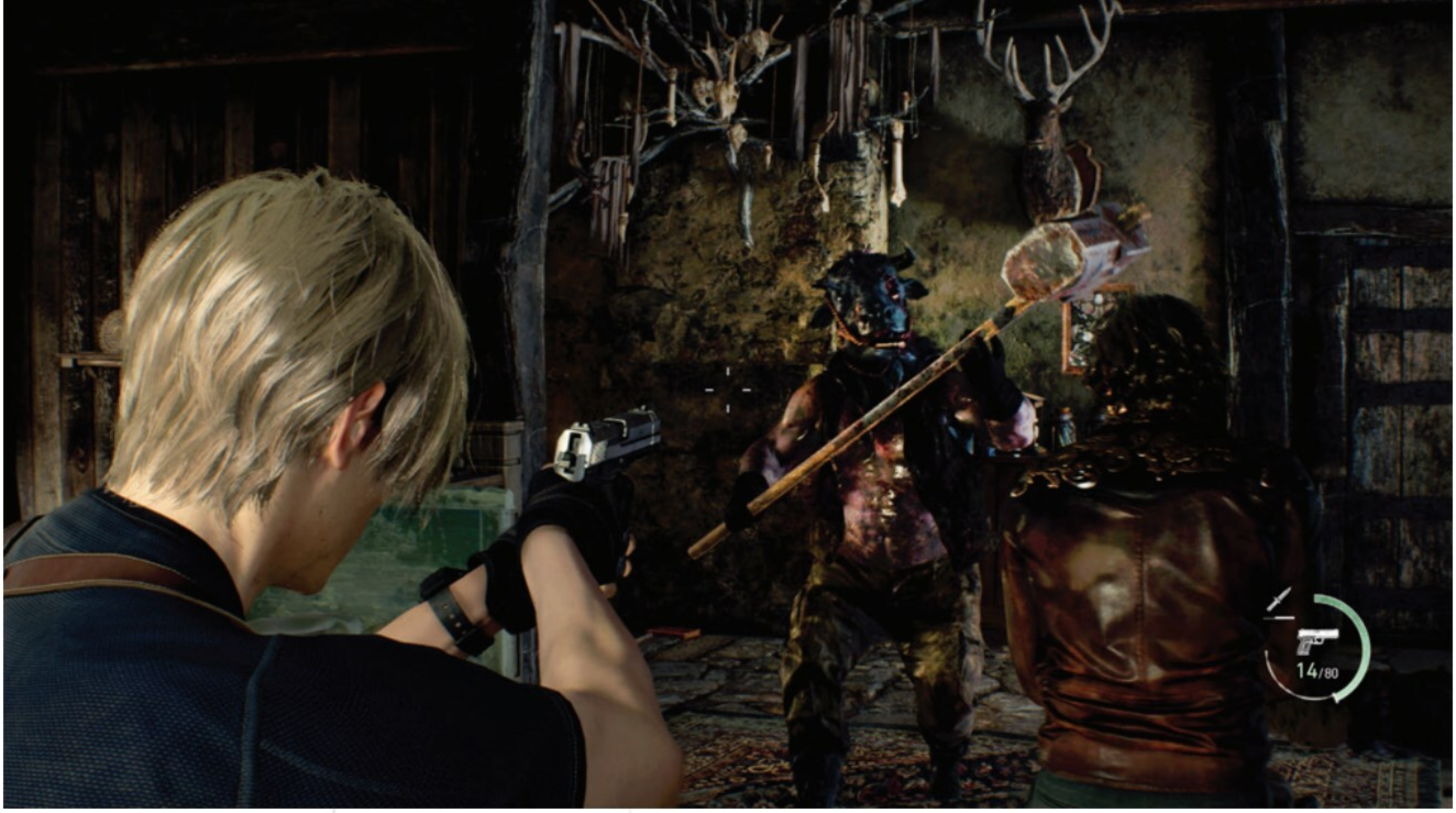
# THE GRAVEYARD SHIFTS

As I carefully escort Ashley through the Ganados-laden cemetery, my attempt at stealth fails again, and the hostile, torch-bearing villagers swarm me. At this point, parasites erupt from their heads left and right, forcing me to deal with a parade of these monstrosities. Thankfully, I now have a more complete arsenal. Expect to see the classic weapon line-up return, such as the pistol, shotgun, rifle, and submachine gun, which I seamlessly cycle through to blast these threats apart. Targeting their mutated eyes deals extra damage, but since the Plaga is sensitive to light, tossing a flash grenade still causes their heads to explode in a shower of infected goo.

I exhaust much of my ammo in this section, but players can craft bullets from scratch within the menu. As in the previous remakes, collecting and mixing various gunpowders creates ammo for each firearm. Capcom included this mechanic to ensure players could continue using their favorite weapons rather than being forced to use a gun only because they had its ammo and nothing else. Though it may sound like this makes Resident Evil 4 an easier game, the fact that enemies are harder to hit means I still strategically picked my shots and burned through ammo. At least during my playtime, it seems the team has struck a good balance.

I eventually find a new weapon in the game, the bolt thrower. This nifty crossbow fires piercing arrows that can be retrieved and used again. It also makes less noise than a standard firearm, making it ideal for picking off enemies in stealth. With Hirabayashi's guidance, I locate detachable mines and equip them to the bolt thrower, granting each shot an explosive punch. These can also detonate in the proximity of enemies, letting you strategically fire mines in the paths of patrolling Ganados. Though I only saw the bolt thrower, Capcom confirmed other new, specialized weapons are in the game.

While taking down familiar foes, a new challenger bursts into the fray. This brick house of a farmer wears the severed head of a bull as a mask, making him resemble a deranged minotaur. He also carries a giant hammer to pound Leon into ground beef. I'm completely thrown off-guard by this unfamiliar face, and he takes advantage of my surprise by running me over with a battering ram-like charge. I recover and fire several shotgun blasts into his ample gut, which, at first, barely stagger him. Eventually, he reaches a breaking point and drops to a knee, creating a window to perform a forward kick to push him back. Some well-timed dodges allow me to outmaneuver this giant, and he finally goes down after a few more shots and no small degree of effort.



Capcom teases that this bull-man isn't the only new threat lying in wait for players. As for boss battles, Capcom states it has captured the "essence" of what most of them were in the original while overhauling others, but won't go into specifics.

Another addition I encounter is sidequests. These take the form of blue flyers posted around the environment. The few I collect offer tasks such as solving a puzzle, delivering the carcasses of three snakes, and tracking and killing a Plaga-infected wild dog (it's not that dog). The blue medallion quest from the original also falls under this umbrella. After completing sidequests, you must turn them into the Merchant for a reward. Though you can sometimes return to the main areas later to complete unfinished tasks, you'll know a point of no return is coming when the Merchant drops not-so-subtle suggestions to wrap up any errands.

I complete some of these tasks effortlessly, but the infected dog quest requires more poking around, as Hirabayashi informs me triggering its appearance requires taking a special route. He takes the controller from me, and Leon comes face to face with a Plagas-riddled canine boasting oversized teeth, glowing eyes, and a backside teeming with tentacles. It's unsurprisingly vicious, and Hirabayashi dumps a ton of ammo into his sturdy quarry, barely surviving before it finally keels over in defeat. It's a neat little battle not seen in the original, making me curious about what other kinds of "hunts" Resident Evil 4 has in store.

As for puzzles, Capcom states it hasn't duplicated any of them exactly, but they'll reappear in spirit. The church's stained glass exercise was already taken care of at the beginning of Chapter Five, but whether or not players engage with it in the same way is unclear. One sidequest did offer a new twist on the cemetery riddle I won't spoil, but read the sidebar to learn how it works.

Exploring this larger area of the village reveals various new routes, interior or otherwise, giving me plenty of options for progression and uncovering extra goodies. That includes new lore notes that expand the supporting characters' backstories. Capcom says Ramón Salazar, in particular, has much more background to unearth. On top of finding additional ammo, treasures, and crafting materials, the alternate paths allow for new approaches for trekking through areas. When I reenter the village square, I keep taking one way I believe to be the primary road until Hirabayashi showed me a hidden underground passage to the right of me that circumvents several enemies with less resistance. These areas always offered players a few options to get by, but it's exciting to see more of them.

## THE TWINS REBORN

An example of how the remake reworks Resident Evil 4's puzzles is the cemetery twins. In the original, players could obtain a locked jewel hidden behind the church by rotating dials on a device to light up insignias matching the headstones of three pairs of deceased twins. A new sidequest calls back to this riddle, challenging players to shoot the headstones for these twins after identifying the correct symbol. My memory of the original puzzle helped me remember which insignia to look for, and it's a novel way for fans to apply their existing knowledge in a different way.

## HOUSE PARTY

I eventually reach the end of my trek with a horde of Ganados in hot pursuit. Luis Serra, Leon's suave and suspicious ally, beckons us into a house for protection. After a tense exchange where Leon question's Luis' motives for assisting them, they table the conversation as the mob arrives to swarm the house.

This battle, a memorable sequence from the original game, unfolds as it did in 2005, but with some tweaks. For one, you can now barricade windows using nearby planks à la the Resident Evil 2 remake, in addition to blockading them using book-shelves, as in the original. Capcom says Luis also behaves more intelligently and is a more capable ally. At one point, I down an enemy with a headshot, then Luis quickly rushes over to stab them before he can rise again. He has a similarly quick response time throughout the battle, and I feel like I'm splitting the work with a real partner this time.

That's good because keeping as many Ganados out of the building is a more sweat-inducing challenge than before. But it's a test I relish, as it puts the more enjoyable action on full display. By the time we gun down the final threat, I feel spent, but eager to take on whatever the game is ready to throw at me next.

## LIVING UP TO THE NAME

Chapter Five concludes, and I reluctantly relinquish the controller. The only thought on my mind: I want to keep playing. The action, tension, and presentation are very polished, and I walk away extremely impressed with what Capcom has presented thus far.

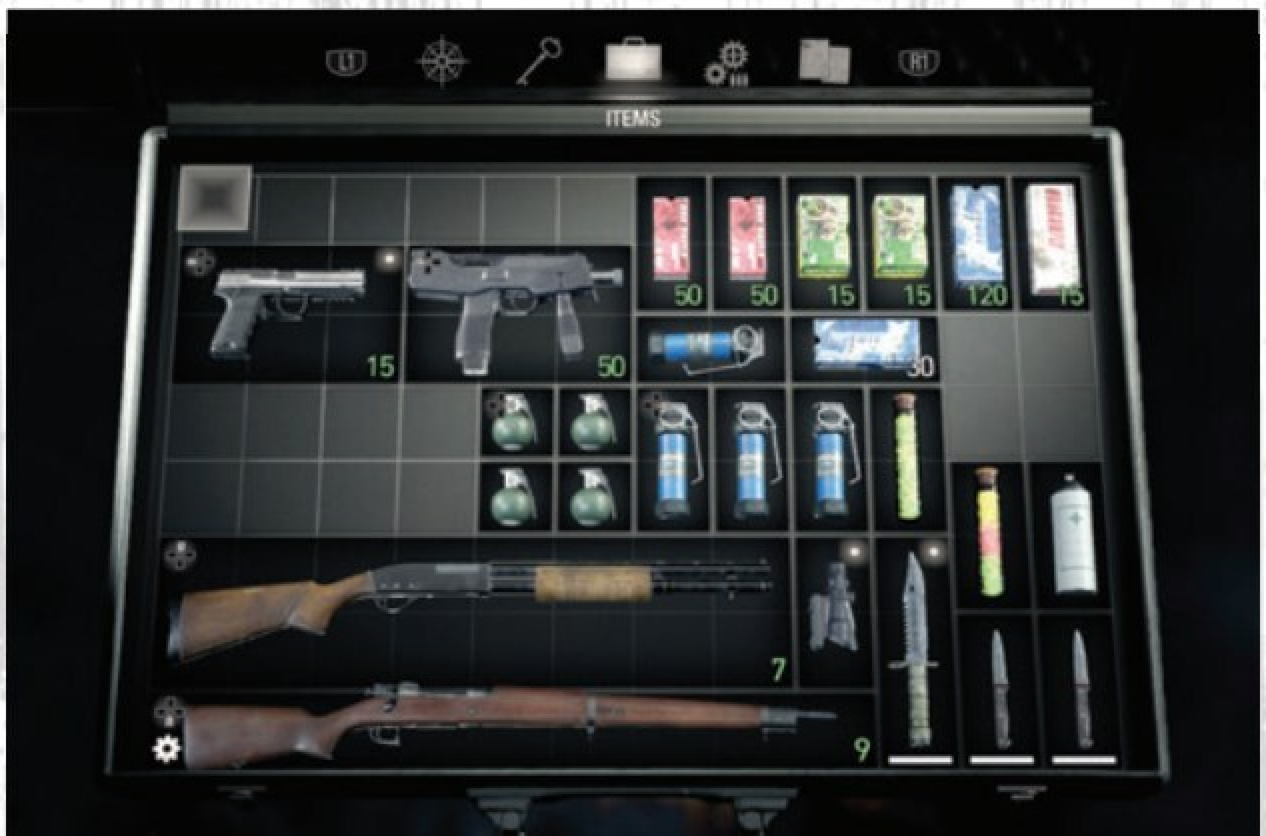
So far, Capcom is nailing what it set out to do. The remake still feels like the original in many ways, but it doesn't trick me into believing it duplicates my rose-colored memory. Instead, it plays like a new game from an alternate timeline where Resident Evil 4 debuted in 2023 instead of 2005. The differences are significant, but they blend seamlessly with the existing flavor in a way that can fool you into thinking they'd always been part of the recipe. I adore the previous remakes (especially Resident Evil 2) for accomplishing the same feat, and it gives me confidence Resident Evil 4 is on the right track.

"With a remake, you are literally remaking a previous game," says Kadoi. "But a remake gives you [a] chance to also build upon the original as well, I think. For instance, if the original was developed over two years, and the remake also is given two years of development, you can really think of the remake as a culmination of four years' worth of work. And in that case, naturally, you should be able to make something better with four years' work than with two. Maybe it's just me that thinks that way."

What excites me most about Resident Evil 4 is that it feels scary again. The immaculate lighting makes spotting an enemy's looming shadow as it moves across the village an intimidating sight. The hair-raising sound design makes every pained groan sound more excruciating while also toying with your

## BUILDING A CASE

The attaché case is a fan-favorite element of Resident Evil 4. You can still arrange inventory items in a Tetris-like fashion, but Capcom is adding customization options to make the inventory feature actively useful in-game. You can now equip different types of cases that, in addition to featuring cosmetic flourishes, grant perks such as increased ammo drops. On top of that, you can hang charms from the case modeled after items that also bestow small bonuses. The cases remain the same in inventory allotment, but this change gives players yet another option for customizing their experience.



perception of its source. The Ganados are creepier than ever, the contorted anger on their faces expressed in terrifying detail. The game still has its off-the-wall action, but my trigger finger felt shakier.

Resident Evil 4 has many memorable moments, and I can't wait to see how Capcom makes fans fall in love with them all over again. If all goes well, we may end up spending yet another decade swooning over Leon and Ashley's Spanish escape. ■

*For more information on Resident Evil 4, be sure to visit GameInformer.com/ResidentEvil4 to check out a month's worth of exclusive feature articles and videos*

# Our Top 10 Games of 2022

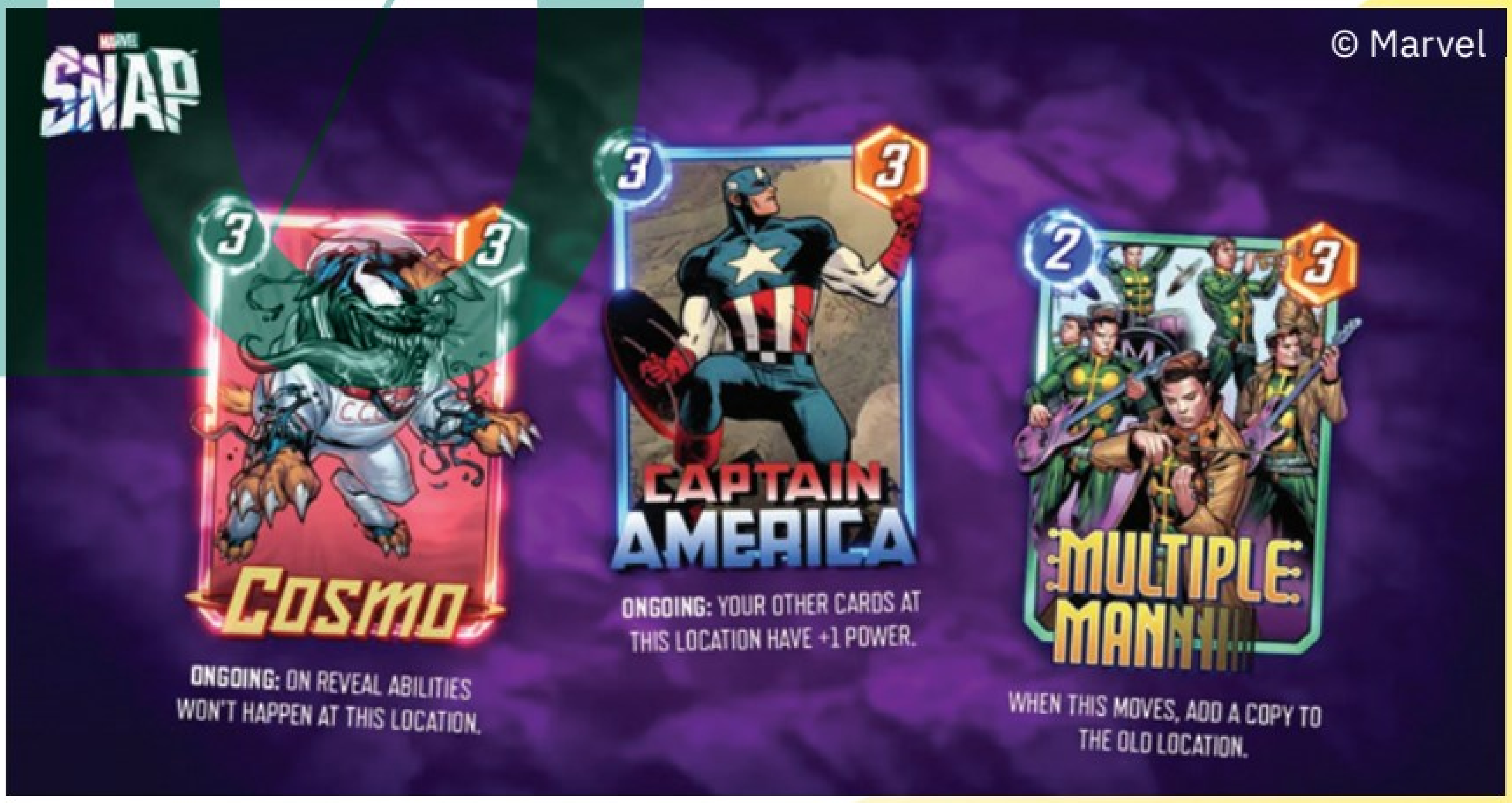
by **GAME INFORMER STAFF**

In 2022, we saw the releases of long-awaited games from proven developers, excellent indie games, and titles with the potential to influence the future of video game creativity. From Software crafted arguably one of the most impressive open worlds ever created. Poncle stripped down the twin-stick shooter formula to create something simple, new, and rewarding. Sony's Santa Monica Studio proved again that it is among the best in the industry at storytelling, performance capture, and action. For a third time, Sam Barlow showed that the FMV genre has plenty of room for new ideas and novel stories.

And that's only scratching the surface. We're years into the current console generation, and developers frequently prove they know how to use modern tools to create amazing experiences. 2022 may not have been a hard year to pick our favorites, but it was difficult to pick only 10.

## 10

# Marvel Snap


MARVEL SNAP
3
3
COSMO
ONGOING: ON REVEAL ABILITIES WON'T HAPPEN AT THIS LOCATION.
3
3
CAPTAIN AMERICA
ONGOING: YOUR OTHER CARDS AT THIS LOCATION HAVE +1 POWER.
2
3
MULTIPLE MAN
WHEN THIS MOVES, ADD A COPY TO THE OLD LOCATION.

© Marvel

While cards adorned with popular Marvel characters might attract players to Marvel Snap, its engaging fast-paced gameplay keeps them around. Lasting only a few minutes each, matches are short and sweet, condensing all the fun and complexity of larger deck builders into an efficient mobile package. With 12 cards to a deck and six turns in a game, every decision is meaningful, and the outcome of a match often comes down to the very last card. Even as you become familiar with common decks and locations, there are enough variables to make every game different than the last, whether it's the locations that appear, your opponent's strategies, or even the order you draw your cards.

When it comes to building decks, Marvel Snap has far more options than just the mainstream characters: obscure characters like Ka-Zar and Sunspot are some of the most popular choices out there. And while it is a free game, Marvel Snap's beautiful card illustrations and animations ensure it never feels cheap. Cards evolve as you use them, becoming shiny, 3D, and animated by the time you max them out. Microtransactions and season passes are present but not pushy, and upgrades are mostly cosmetic, so the playing field always stays even. Marvel Snap is a game we picked up to begrudgingly try and haven't put down since. This comic book card collector isn't just one of the best games this year; it's one people will be playing for a long time.

## 9

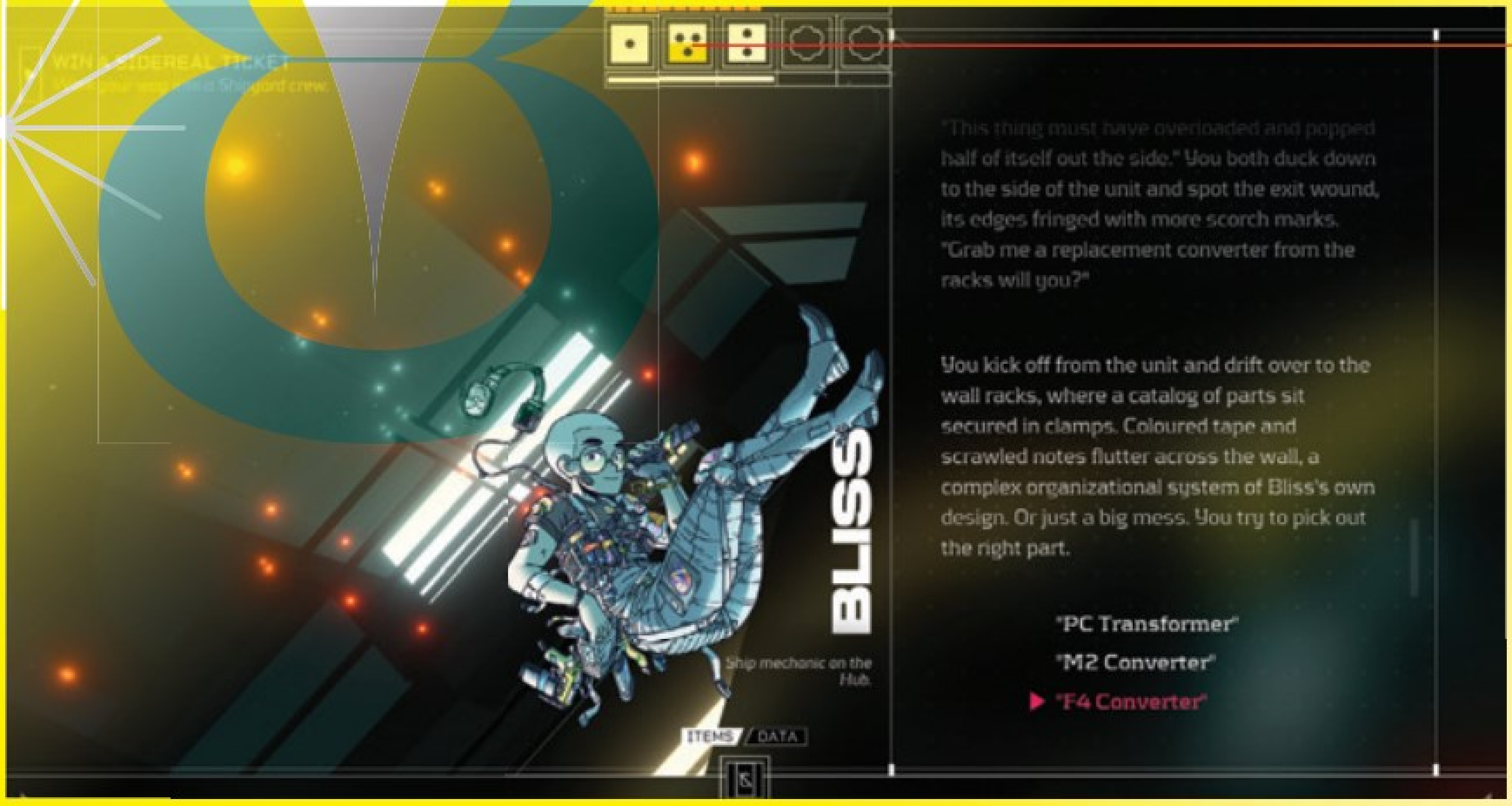
# Tunic

Screenshots and trailers for Tunic promised a Zelda-inspired adventure starring a cute animal. Frankly, a compelling pitch for any video game. But when you dig a little deeper, you discover Tunic is far more than the story of an adorable bipedal fox. For one, it features brutally satisfying souls-like combat. Boss fights are beautiful, intense spectacles that feel fantastic to conquer. The art direction is unique yet nostalgic. The soundtrack is both meditative and motivating. But what truly sets Tunic apart is its secrets and how it quietly and consistently rewards players for unraveling them.

In-game text is written in a fictional language, so the world must be understood through context. This is demonstrated best in the brilliant instruction manual, a meta-document you slowly collect pages of that teaches you how to play the game. Written entirely in Tunic's fictional language, it requires you to read between the lines, making something as simple as figuring out how to dodge enemies feel like a victory. This constant deciphering is immensely satisfying because it's always an extremely personal success. You might have all the clues you need hours before realizing it, and few games leave you with such powerful "eureka" moments. The final puzzle is not only a great example but one of the most fantastic puzzles in gaming history. Tunic looks and plays like games you may be familiar with, but its secrets make it special and earn it a place on our list.

## 8

# Citizen Sleeper



"This thing must have overloaded and popped half of itself out the side." You both duck down to the side of the unit and spot the exit wound, its edges fringed with more scorch marks. "Grab me a replacement converter from the racks will you?"

You kick off from the unit and drift over to the wall racks, where a catalog of parts sit secured in clamps. Coloured tape and scrawled notes flutter across the wall, a complex organizational system of Bliss's own design. Or just a big mess. You try to pick out the right part.

"PC Transformer"
"M2 Converter"
▶ "F4 Converter"

Citizen Sleeper's dystopian transhumanist premise is immediately enthralling – survive as a digitized consciousness of a human somewhere else implanted into a body designed to work tirelessly for a mega-corporation. But what happens when you say "no" is the heart of this cyberpunk tabletop-esque RPG. Those events and how they play out are up to you, your decisions, and strangely, pre-determined dice rolls.

This unique mechanic is core to how your story in Citizen Sleeper advances and every roll will affect what happens next, which is to say that everything you do directly affects some aspect of the narrative. One of the most impressive aspects of this feature is that in any of the directions your journey might take you, the game serves you a result that makes you feel something; stress, happiness, heartbreak, *something*. And that's what's so enrapturing about Citizen Sleeper. It feels personal, weighty, and decisive, despite various storylines and endings, heightened by a ticking clock forcing you to make urgent hard decisions.

You can't help everyone, but you can help some, and whom you help and how you do it is based on randomized dice rolls tied to your character's physical state, meaning what happens next is never guaranteed. That developer Jump Over The Age has encased all of this within a striking visual style, Tycho-like sci-fi beats, and standout writing is why Citizen Sleeper is one of the best narratives of the year.

7

# Marvel's Midnight Suns

© Marvel

Firaxis has a long history with its excellent Civilization and XCOM series, but it was hard to know what to expect when the developer took on the biggest comic book heroes in the world. The studio put any doubts to rest with the launch of Marvel's Midnight Suns, which combined the team's strategic know-how and Marvel's large stable of memorable characters into a fast-paced and lengthy strategy adventure.

While the turn-based tactical play Firaxis is known for remains in place, the superhero narrative leads to bigger explosions, cool powers, and tighter, more personal battles that force opponents into sudden melees. A clever twist on deckbuilding card play governs the combat, growing more sophisticated over dozens of hours. In between missions, a deep RPG and character conversation loop leads to players exploring an ancient abbey and uncovering puzzles that fill out the lore. Players befriend the likes of Wolverine, Spider-Man, and Captain Marvel when not discovering these grounds.

Midnight Suns delights in its supernatural and occult twist on Marvel fiction. But despite the dark subject matter, it's a rollicking and humorous adventure that captures what many love about the Marvel universe. And with deep strategy and RPG roots, it may even make some converts into superhero fandom.

# Kirby and the Forgotten Land

Kirby and the Forgotten Land shouldn't be as good as it is. Especially considering how much it moves away from what's been successful for the insatiable pink ball since 1992. The titular Forgotten Land is full of distinct, post-apocalyptic environments. The overgrown landscape has reclaimed shopping malls, carnivals, construction zones, and ocean fronts alike, full of secrets to uncover despite their lonesome quality. Mouthful Mode – Kirby's new ability to swallow massive items like boats and cars – is a joy to use, incentivizing players to solve environmental challenges in novel ways, as you never know which weird transformation awaits you next.

Kirby is no stranger to exploring bizarre new locations, but Forgotten Land feels like the series' most realized world. The 3D gameplay – a first for Kirby – suits him well. Saving the lost Waddle Dees, expanding their hometown, and exploring Kirby's suite of new and returning abilities is the most fun it's ever been. And the finale will likely go down in Kirby's history as one of the best, wildest spectacles of his career. HAL Laboratory knows how to end a Kirby game well, and Forgotten Land is its best effort yet. Kirby and the Forgotten Land is a delightful and charming game offering new experiences around every bend.

## 5

# Immortality

AMBROSIO – 9/13/68

Immortality is a lot to see, play, and deal with.

Telling five different stories, all out of sequence – or more accurately, in a sequence semi-determined by the player – the fact that any of it lands (or makes sense) is nothing short of a herculean feat. But it does. Across several hours, learning about the career and life of actress Marissa Marcel is constantly captivating and often horrifying.

Immortality is playing with many different ideas: the abuses of artists, the love of filmmaking, auteur theory, women's roles in the film industry, the cyclical nature of art, and a dozen more heady ideas that won't fit my character count. At times, its story feels deeply cynical. Perhaps even a bit nihilistic. But, like much good art, that's merely my interpretation. You may walk away from it with a wholly different perspective.

Whatever you think, there's no denying it's doing it thoughtfully. From a pure content perspective, Immortality is one of the most adult games ever made – it's full of sex, death, and more nudity than maybe any other video game before it. But more importantly, it feels like one of the most mature stories ever told in games. It trusts the player to grapple with very complex themes and emotions – many of which are new territory for video games with large audiences. While many of our top 10 have great stories, none feel this well thought out. As such, Immortality is a game that haunts you long after it's over, as you do your best to unpack everything you've seen.

## 4

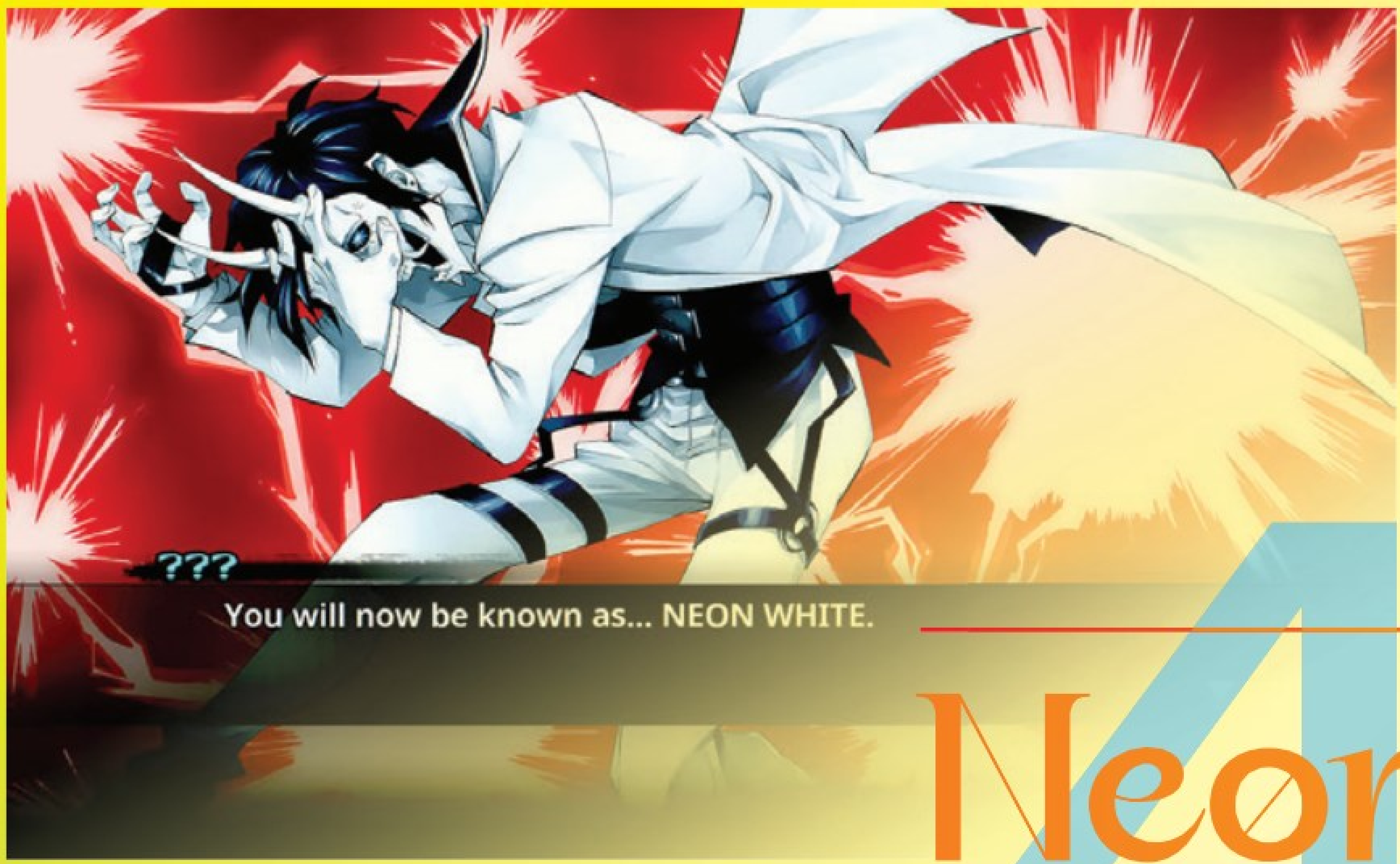
# Neon White

Above all else, Neon White wants you to feel cool. Everything – from the art, the music, and of course, the gameplay – is all in service to that one simple rule.

While there is a learning curve for true mastery, Neon White makes you feel like a pro from the jump, flying through its more than 100 brief levels like a speedrunner that's practiced for years. Which, from a game design perspective, is astounding. From level one, Neon White never stands in your way, allowing you to "expertly" play at your level, but always with room to go up.

Arguably second to looking cool, Neon White is just so damn fun. While a single level will rarely take more than 60 seconds, it's all too easy to lose yourself for hours in its twisted view of heaven as you try over and over for better times – running, jumping, and shooting your way through the pearly gates like a bat out of hell. "One more try" turns into 10. "One more level" turns into two more chapters. Before you know it, you've become a master of Neon White's action platforming. Which, of course, means you have to go back through every level another time, once again besting all your previous times. To reiterate, it's an astounding feat of game design that this feels more like a privilege than a chore.

Neon White is easily one of the best-playing games of the year, and perhaps any other year before it, and for that reason alone, it's claimed a spot high atop our best-of 2022 list.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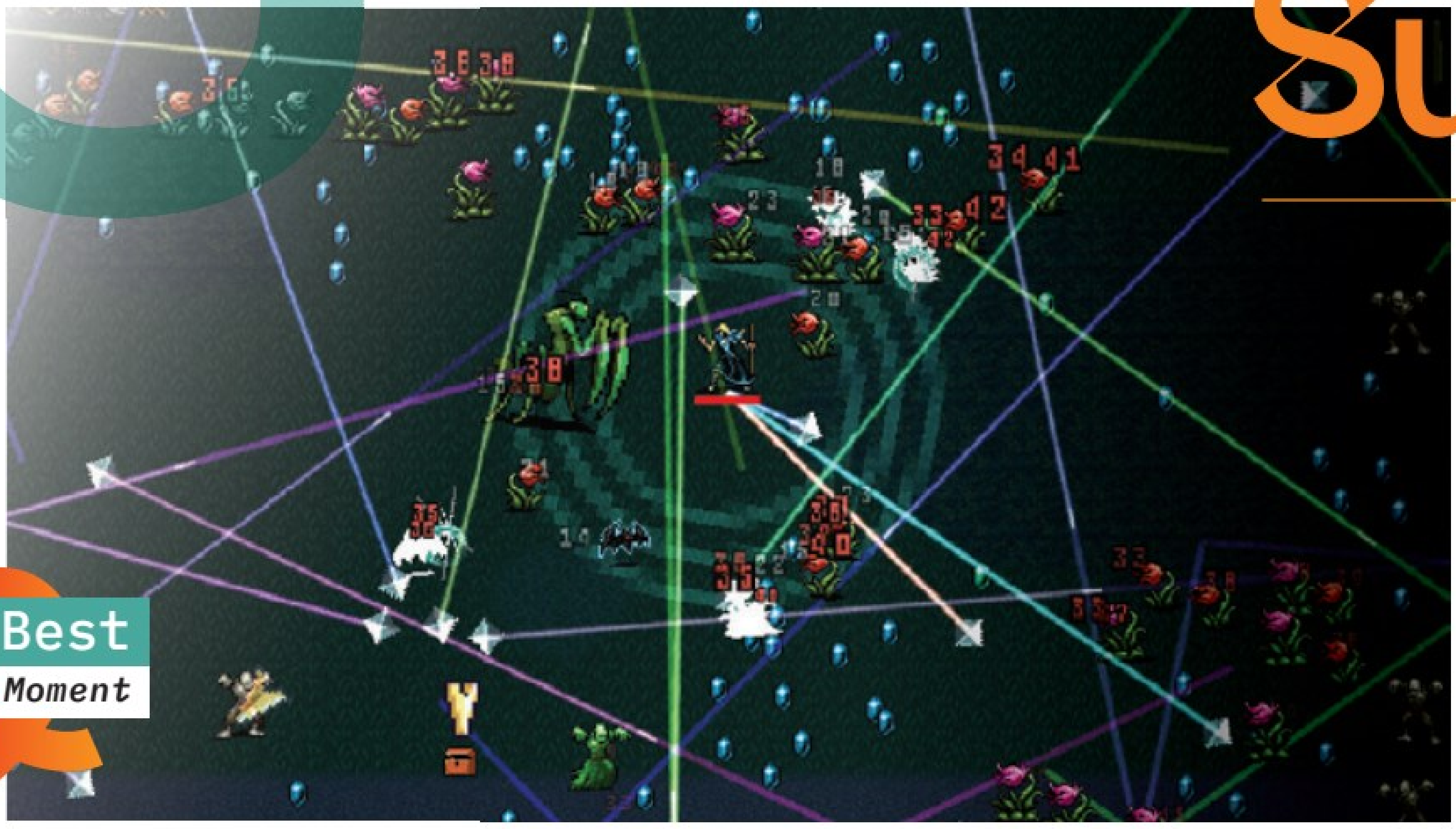
You will now be known as... NEON WHITE.

3

# Vampire Survivors



**Best**
*Moment*

Vampire Survivors' simple, single-stick bullet-hell gameplay perfects the formula used by countless others and creates one of the most impossible-to-put-down experiences of the year.

Mowing down hordes of monsters enroute to leveling your abilities is supremely satisfying, but the true excitement comes with smartly selecting your power-ups upon each gained level. It's constantly exciting finding the right combination to turn your hero into an unstoppable killing machine. The idea of "just one more match" is as omnipresent as any game we've played in recent memory. It's the kind of game you begin obsessing over, even when you aren't playing.

The icing on the cake lies in just how approachable Vampire Survivors is. Not only are the controls immediately understandable and the core conceits as basic as they get, but with a $5 price tag, it's an easy game to take a chance on. So far, that low cost-of-entry hasn't spelled the nickel-and-diming players are accustomed to in the age of free-to-play gaming. Instead, developer Poncle has only released one piece of DLC: a $2 expansion adding a substantial amount of content. More than anything, that low price tag has only ensured a massive fan base for this superb title.

# God of War Ragnarök

God of War Ragnarök was one of the most anticipated sequels in recent years. It had to live up to the 2018 soft reboot's excellence, and it had to do so without the tonal shift and gameplay transformation we praised its predecessor so highly for four years ago. Ragnarök did just that and then some. From the moment the game begins, it demands your attention. It answers questions left dangling by God of War (2018) soon after, but replaces them with more alluring quandaries from two newcomer standouts: the intelligent and arrogant mafia-esque leader of the realms, Odin, and his son, the calm and collected but imposing god of thunder, Thor. Both are commanding in presence throughout the game, matched only by Kratos and his now-teenage son Atreus.

Ragnarök's explosive opening moments set up an intriguing realm-spanning expedition to stop the titular war, and while its pacing ebbs and flows between wide-linear exploration and cinematic set pieces roaring with revelations, it's hard to find an unenjoyable moment. Whether it was clearing Draugr holes or uncovering the central mystery, this sequel repeatedly hits you with that "maybe I'll play just 15 more minutes" feeling.

In almost every way, Ragnarök succeeds as a sequel, both in how it addresses criticisms, storylines, and mechanics of 2018 and how it sets up a mysterious future for where the series can go. We already can't wait for more; whatever that "more" hopefully ends up being one day.

2

**Best**
*Hero, Villain, & Sony Exclusive*

# 1

# Elden Ring

From the moment the underground elevator thrusts you into Elden Ring's Lands Between, it's clear you're committing to a special experience that doesn't come along often. Over decades now, we've explored all manner of open worlds in video games. Still, Elden Ring's is horrifying, mysterious, beautiful, and most importantly, inviting in a way few other games achieve. The failures are punishing. The victories are exuberant. And through it all, an undeniable draw pulls you in, demanding you discover every inch of the world.

Instances of quiet exploration reward the player frequently, while impressive moments punctuate the adventure with explosive spectacle. Our favorite boss of the year, Starscourge Radahn (which you can read about on page 63), crashes into the world like a meteor. Exploring the Academy of Raya Lucaria pits you against Rennala, Queen of the Full Moon, whose battle takes place in a shallow lake in the heavens against the backdrop of a gigantic full moon.

Those moments are breathtaking, but even walking from one location to another introduces all manner of powerful and intimidating creatures. Dragons the size of buildings, lobsters with gigantic fatal claws, and even wolves that fall from the sky wait around every corner, coaxing you in and out of the feeling of safety. These monsters will kill you, and they will kill you often, but the only thing slowing you down from getting back to the Lands Between is a loading screen.

Most who experienced Elden Ring have their own story about overcoming the odds and finally understanding, after many hours, just how expansive the world is. Whether you unexpectedly transported across the map and got a surprise taste of its scope early in the game or traveled to the underground city of Nokron after coming across an unassuming elevator in the woods, Elden Ring never betrays its size – and against all odds, every part of it is fascinating. And all that can happen before the first time you finally enter the Royal Capital, Leyndell, after overcoming its powerful guard on horseback on the outskirts of the metropolis.

Elden Ring is challenging, but the euphoria of turning a corner and discovering something incredible and terrifying, and then defeating it is simply unmatched. For all those reasons and more, Elden Ring is *Game Informer*'s game of the year for 2022. ■

# Reader Top Games of 2022

## 10

### POKÉMON LEGENDS: ARCEUS

## 9

### KIRBY AND THE FORGOTTEN LAND

## 8

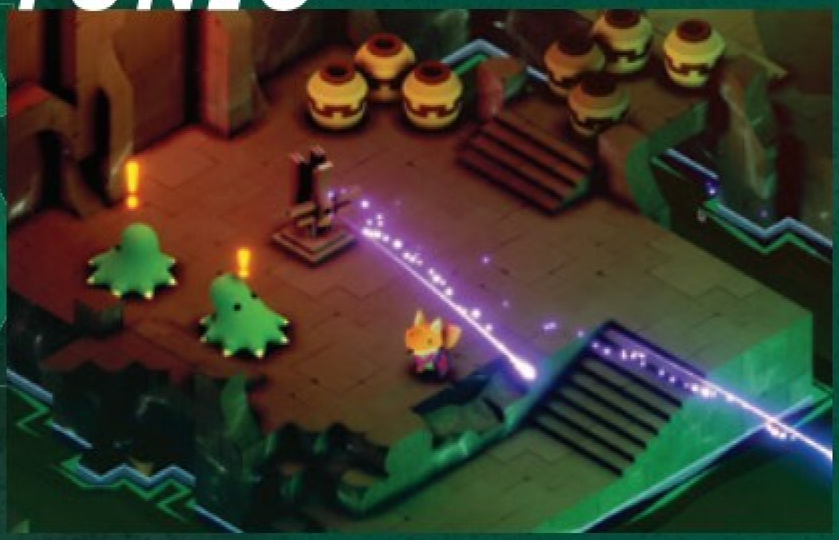
### VAMPIRE SURVIVORS

## 7

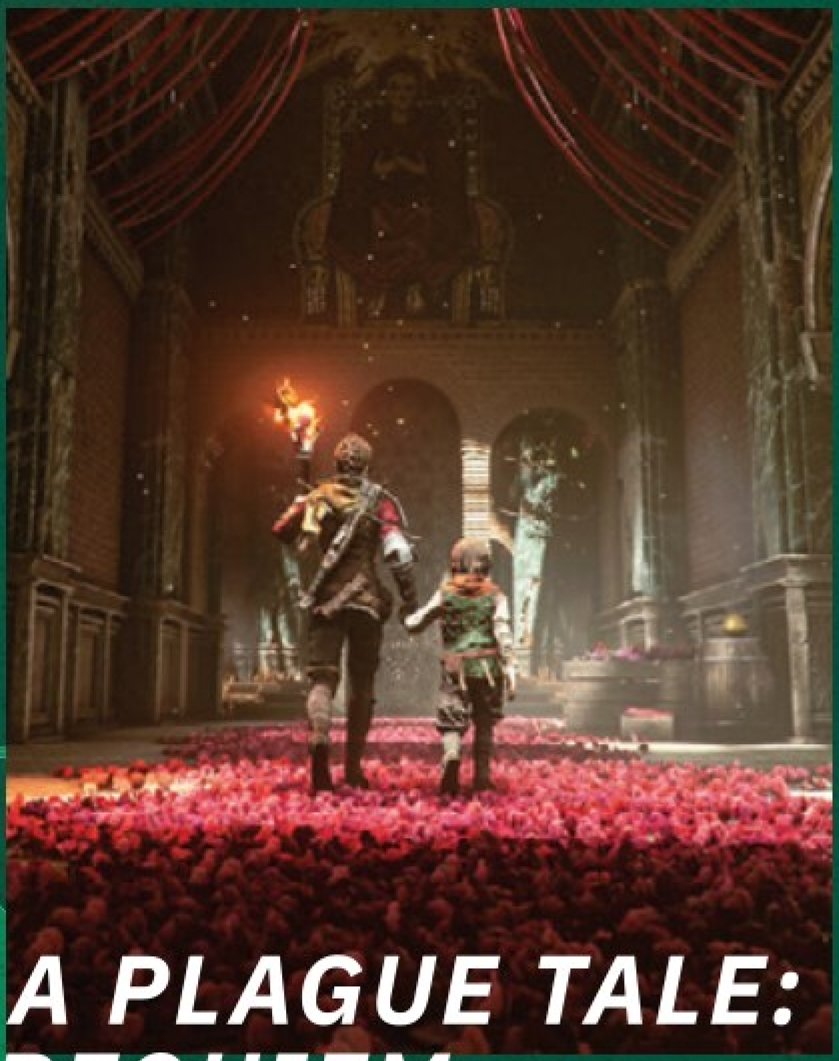
### CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE II

## 6

### TUNIC



## 5



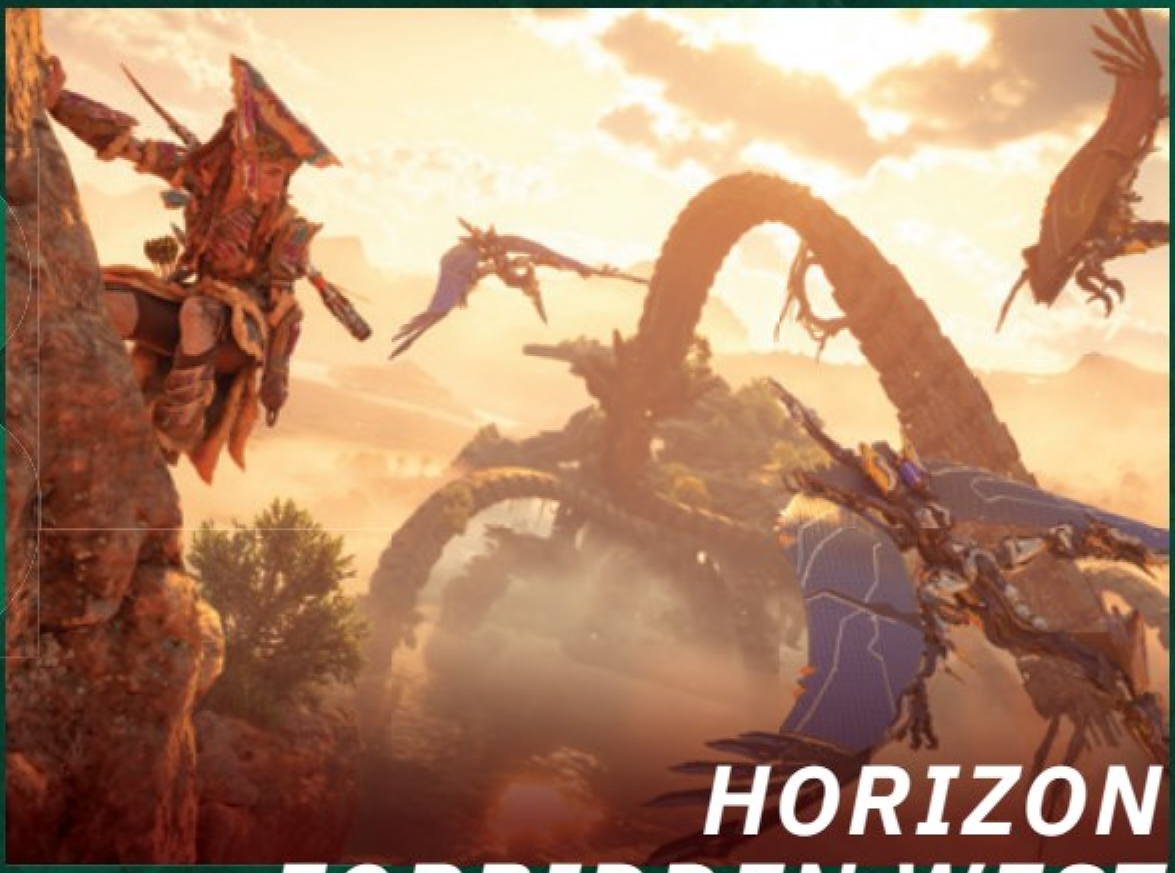
### A PLAGUE TALE: REQUIEM

You've seen and read about our favorite games of the year, but our decisions were only part of the discussion. We wanted to hear what readers thought the year's best games were, so we asked you. For a month, beginning on December 19, we posted a poll online and thousands of readers sent us their top five favorite games of 2022. We used ranked positional voting – the Borda count method – to gather the results below. These are your choices, so you can't yell at us about them. But if you must, please use feedback@gameinformer.com.

## 4

## STRAY

## 3

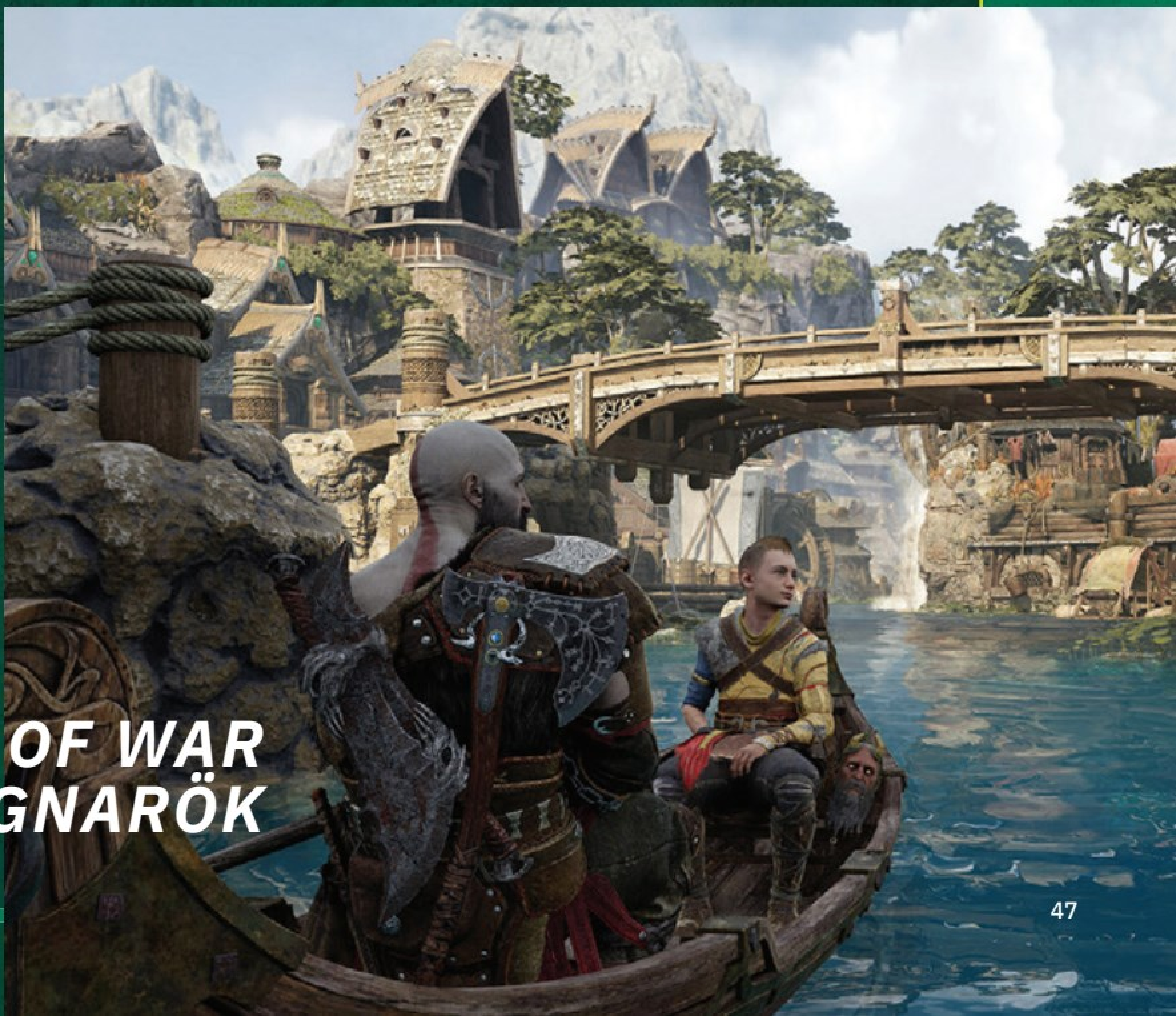


## HORIZON FORBIDDEN WEST

## 2

## ELDEN RING

## 1

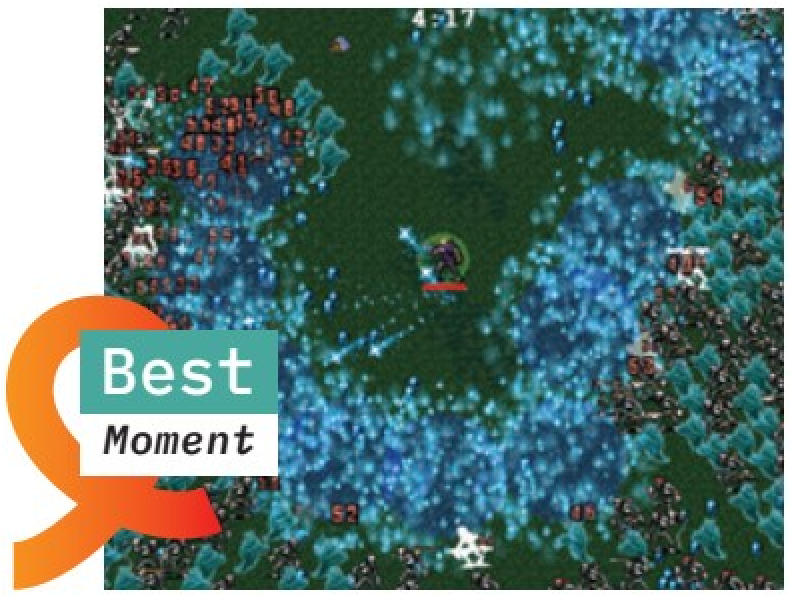


## GOD OF WAR RAGNARÖK

# Best and Brightest of 2022

by **GAME INFORMER STAFF**

It was challenging boiling our massive list of excellent 2022 games down to just 10. Thankfully we're in charge of our magazine, and we technically don't have to. But even with all the games you will see getting a spotlight in the following pages, it would be irresponsible to say we covered them all. This might not be every amazing game from the previous year, but it is a lot of them. Along with the many awards we bestowed to various games on the following pages, you can also read our editor picks – games that *Game Informer*'s writers adored that just didn't quite make the top 10. These games may not be on top, but we highly recommend checking them out if you happened to miss them while you were busy dumping hundreds of hours into the Lands Between.



## Feeling Unstoppable – Vampire Survivors

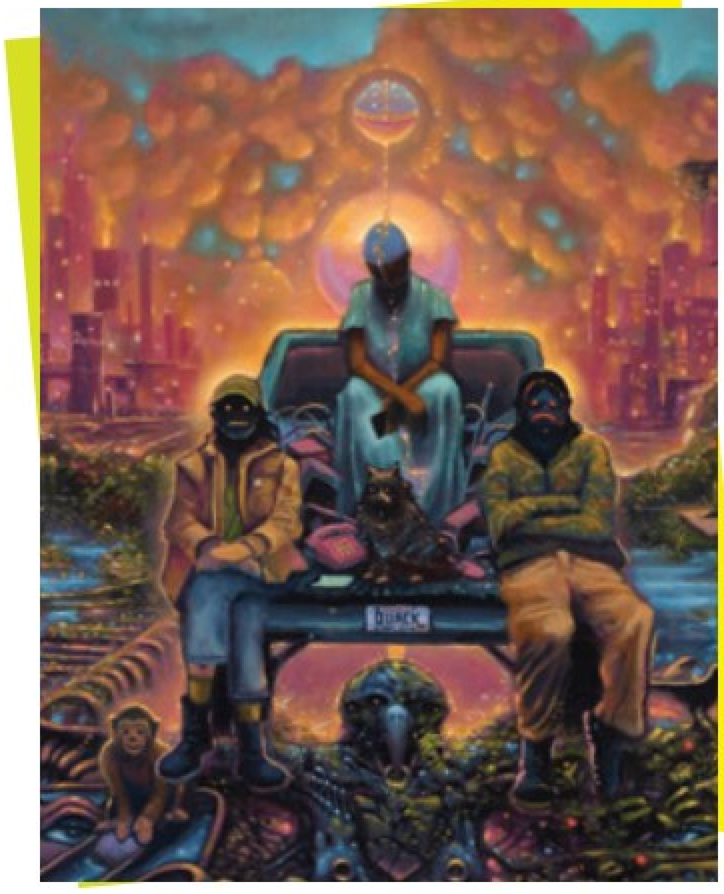
Achieving a state where we could effortlessly obliterate thousands of foes using a litany of powerful weapons turned Vampire Survivors from a fun novelty into an obsession. Who would have thought something so simple could create the most satisfying power fantasy of the year?

editor pick

## XENOBLADE CHRONICLES 3

The Xenoblade series has always had its fans, but the third numbered Chronicles game represents the series' apex while remaining inviting to new players. Like many JRPGs, each Xenoblade game is basically standalone, borrowing more mechanics, themes, and art direction from its predecessor than story. Xenoblade Chronicles 3's setup is instantly intriguing, introducing you to a cast of soldiers who only live 10 years. The premise is strange, but the story quickly goes in interesting directions, and the combat holds up for the admittedly long runtime by frequently adding new mechanics and options. **– KYLE HILLIARD**

editor pick



## NORCO

Set in Norco, Louisiana, this southern gothic starts small, telling the story of a broken family and what's left of it after a death. Norco's family story is a diving board into deeper issues, such as capitalism and its effects on the families that called Louisiana home long before corporations did. It also holds a mirror up to the way religion does significantly more harm than good when it reaches radical, cult-like levels of fanaticism. Norco is authentic, mature, and heartbreaking, and I say all this before giving it bonus points for featuring a detective who goes by LeBlanc. **– WESLEY LEBLANC**

# Need for Speed Unbound

SEIBON
enjukuracing
GReddy

**Best**
**Racing**

editor pick

## SONIC FRONTIERS

Sonic Frontiers takes bold steps towards creating an all-new experience for longtime fans of Sega's flagship franchise. While linear stages paying homage to the past persist, the emphasis of Frontiers is large "open zones," which hint at the hedgehog's future.

Sonic is largely a joy to control in this new setting thanks to smooth running and a new combat system. Each island culminates in a massive, adrenaline-fueled Super Sonic battle that feels ripped straight from an anime. If this new format truly is the foundation of future Sonic games, consider me extremely optimistic. – **BRIAN SHEA**

**Best**
**Developer**

# Epic Games

Thanks to attentive, innovative, and ambitious work behind the scenes, Fortnite had a fantastic 2022. Between Zero Build, massive crossovers, the start of Chapter Four, and a shift to Unreal Engine 5, Epic Games' continued support has kept the biggest game in the world at the top of the charts.

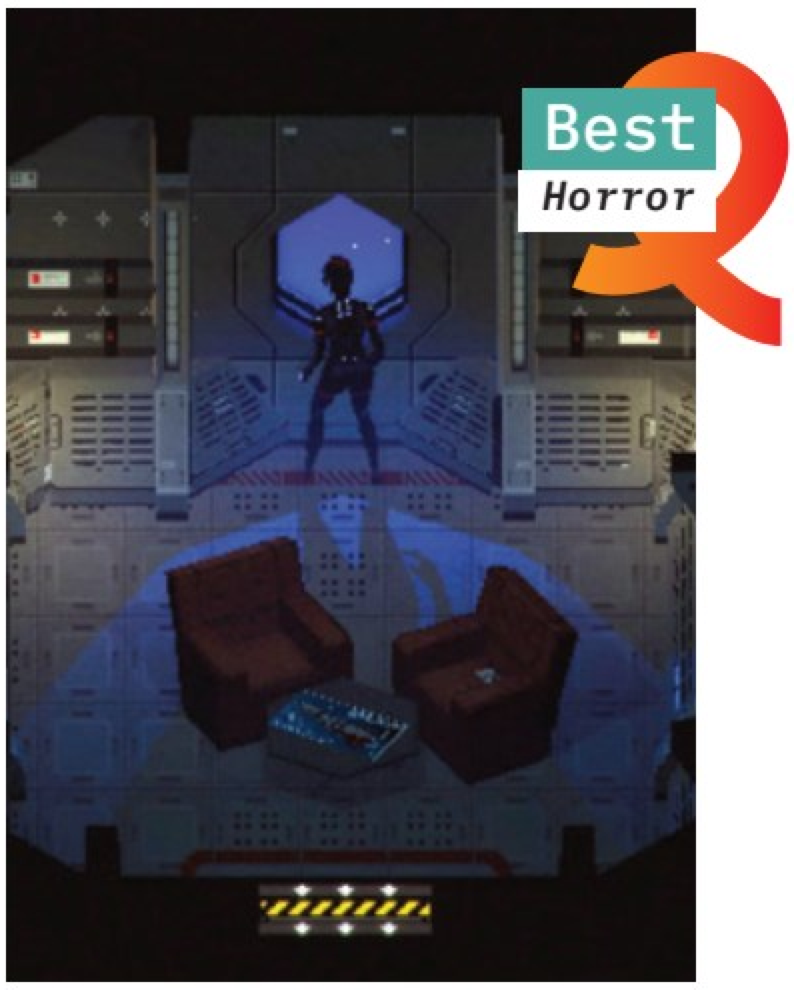
editor pick

## HORIZON FORBIDDEN WEST

Guerrilla Games pulled off exactly what we all want in a sequel – maintaining what was great in the original while expanding in new directions. Forbidden West takes Aloy into exciting territories and environments, but her battles against massive animalistic machines remain thrilling. A memorable cast of characters plays more key roles this time, providing additional foils in building out Aloy as one of video gaming's most heroic figures. Whether marching through the main story or diverting off on many branching paths, everything in this new corner of the Horizon universe feels impactful, beautiful, and rewarding. – **MATT MILLER**

## Signalis

Signalis is one part an homage to the Silent Hill series and one part a beautiful love story about two women who made a promise to each other. While romance drives the narrative, what surrounds it is a Lovecraftian world that grows from sleek abandoned cyberpunk hallways to a festering terror-filled blister of a setting. It features smart puzzles, intricately designed levels, slick gameplay, and a throwback PS1 visual style that makes it stand out in a genre primarily residing today in the 3D space.


Best
Horror

editor pick

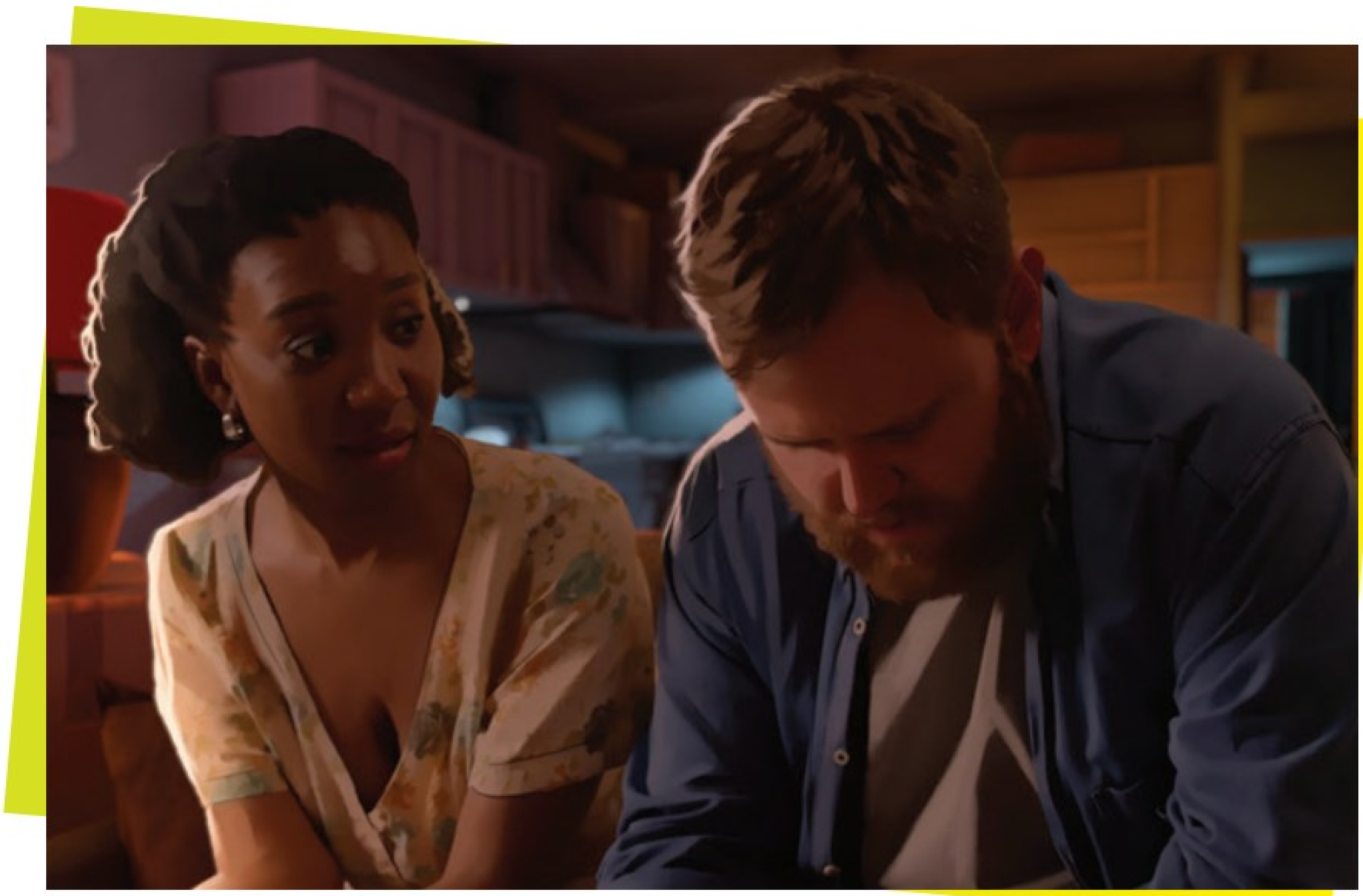
## SPLATOON 3

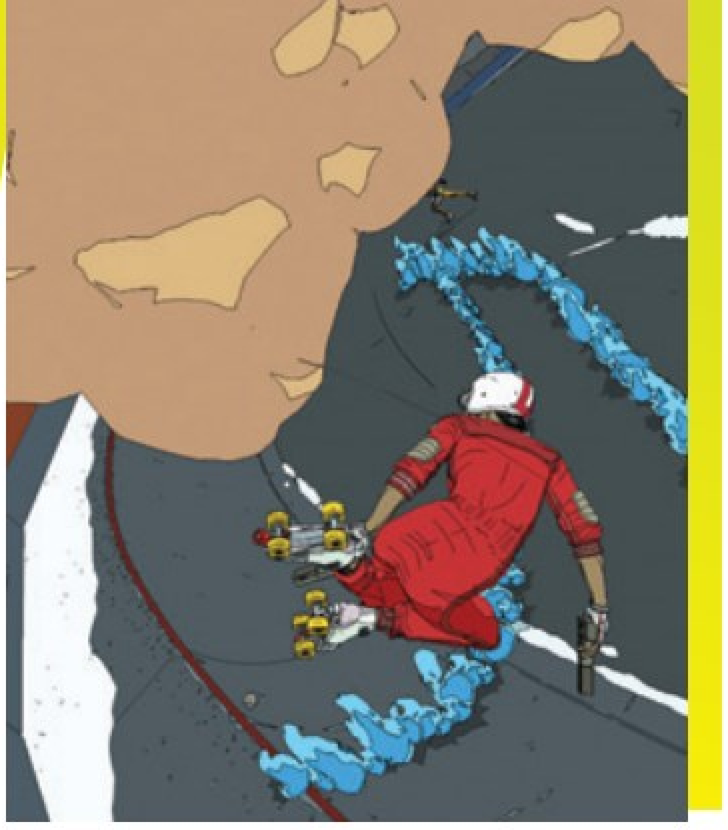
Splatoon 3 didn't reinvent its ink-slinging formula but instead opted to double down on what's made the series work so far, be it ska jams, techwear-inspired fits, or of course, the best third-person shooting available on the Switch. While Nintendo's online connectivity issues continue to plague the game's multiplayer suite, the matches and fast-paced gameplay still sing (when they work). Its campaign is chock full of unique and expertly designed platforming shooter challenges, and Salmon Run is better than ever. Splatoon 3 is far and away the best this series has ever been. – **WESLEY LEBLANC**

editor pick

## AS DUSK FALLS

The web of unforeseen consequences is broad and deep in Interior/Night's gripping interactive drama. Multiple point-of-view characters face the trauma connected to a crime gone wrong, both during and after. As Dusk Falls is a thoughtfully written dramatic narrative where each choice shapes a unique outcome. A lovely, animated style layers art over live-action scenes, providing some of the best traits of film and comics. It's a moving portrait of trauma and its after-effects and a story that makes the repeated point that decisions often ripple beyond our own individual lives. – **MATT MILLER**





editor pick

## ROLLERDROME

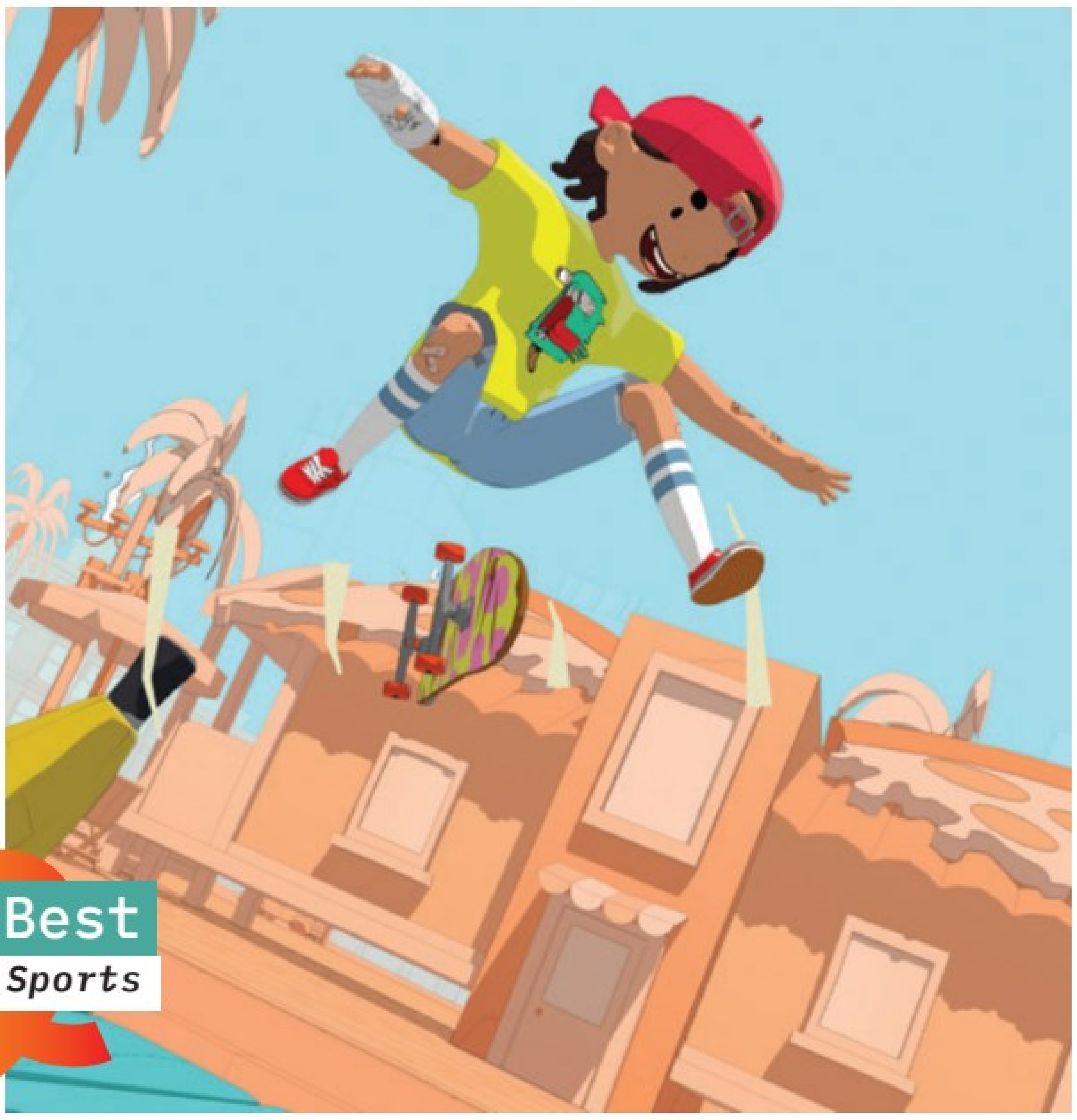
Rollerdrome imagines a future in 2030 where the world population is under the thumb of a handful of major corporations (likely), and a violent, televised roller-skating tournament enraptures everyone (probably not likely). As a participant in the tournament, you must execute frequent and astonishing tricks to keep your ammo topped off to use against the competition. It feels like the best parts of Tony Hawk, combined with the slow-motion gun ballet of Max Payne, wrapped up in a fantastic, cel-shaded, '70s cinema-inspired style. – **KYLE HILLIARD**

## World of Warcraft: Dragonflight

Best

PC Exclusive

## OlliOlli World



Best

Sports

## Radahn – Elden Ring

Radahn's boss fight is a spectacle of challenge and storytelling. From his comically small horse to a comet-crashing attack and a finale that drastically changes the game world, this boss is unforgettable. That we still talk about Radahn more than Elden Ring's other hundreds of bosses is why he's our favorite of the year.

editor pick

## BAYONETTA 3

For at least 70 percent of its runtime, Bayonetta 3 is the best Bayonetta game of all time. Now, that percentage may seem somewhat negative – and to be fair, it can be. Bayonetta's other 30 percent is bad – but the fact is: the Bayonetta games have always been some of the most fun games ever made. So, for this to be the best in class most of the time? That still puts it miles ahead of its competition.

From start to finish, Bayonetta is chaos in the best way. It's loud, obnoxious, and flamboyant, and for the most part, one of the best gaming experiences you'll have this year. The Queen is back, and I'm mostly thrilled. – **BLAKE HESTER**

editor pick

## GHOSTWIRE: TOKYO

On its surface, Ghostwire: Tokyo is not a very good game. It's repetitive and clunky and tells a rote, uninspired story. But it's easily one of my favorite games of the year.

For all its shortcomings, there still isn't much else like Ghostwire. Its art and world design make me forget every other area where it could improve. Combining ancient folklore with contemporary Japan makes this fascinating mismatch of styles that consistently look fantastic and unique. I walked around its world for hours, constantly charmed, and as far as I'm concerned, that's more than enough to make it one of the best games of the year. – **BLAKE HESTER**

**Best**
*Cooperative & Original Score*

## TMNT: Shredder's Revenge

Longtime fans of arcade beat 'em ups received the genre's best game in years through Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge. The superb brawler gameplay and retro-style graphics are rivaled only by a terrific soundtrack by Sonic Mania composer Tee Lopes and the ability to play six-player co-op.

## Jack Garland – Stranger of Paradise: Final Fantasy Origins

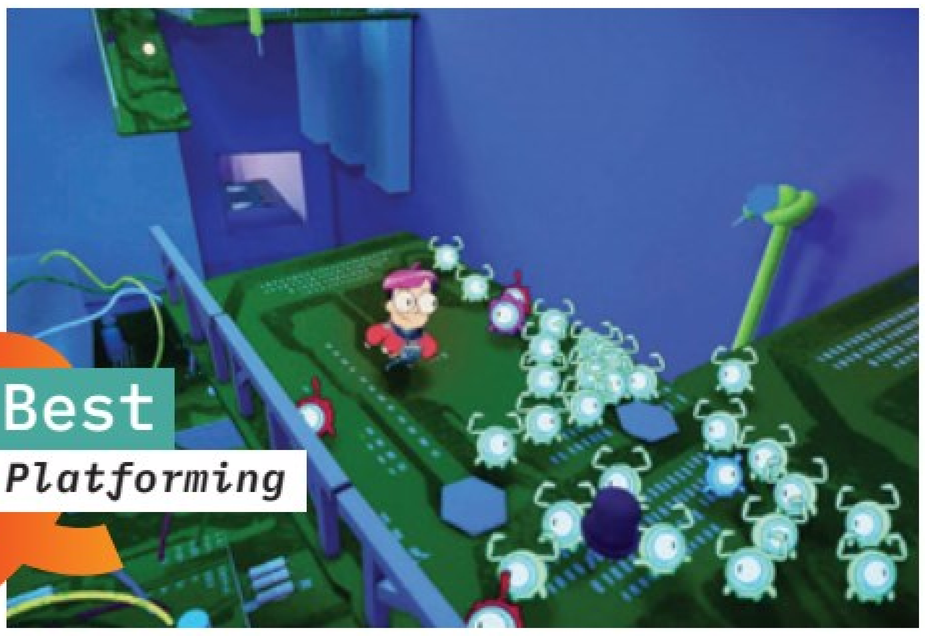
I don't know how often Jack says the word "chaos" in Stranger of Paradise, but if you told me 500, I wouldn't question it. It takes a special kind of dork to look a world-ending villain in the eyes, unironically mention chaos, and then throw a punch that'd be more at home in a Limp Bizkit mosh pit. Jack is that dork.

**Best**
*Dork*

editor pick

## MARIO + RABBIDS SPARKS OF HOPE

Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle was a pleasant surprise, and with its sequel, Sparks of Hope, Ubisoft reinvents its successful formula into a wholly superior experience. Grid-based movement is tossed aside in favor of freeform unit placement, allowing more flexibility in tactics and increased dynamism overall. Newcomers Bowser, Rabbid Rosalina, and Edge are welcome additions, while dozens of Sparks abilities add depth and flash to combat. Expanded overworlds filled with side quests, challenges, and secrets make exploring outside of battle even more fun, cementing Sparks of Hope as a can't-miss sequel. – **MARCUS STEWART**

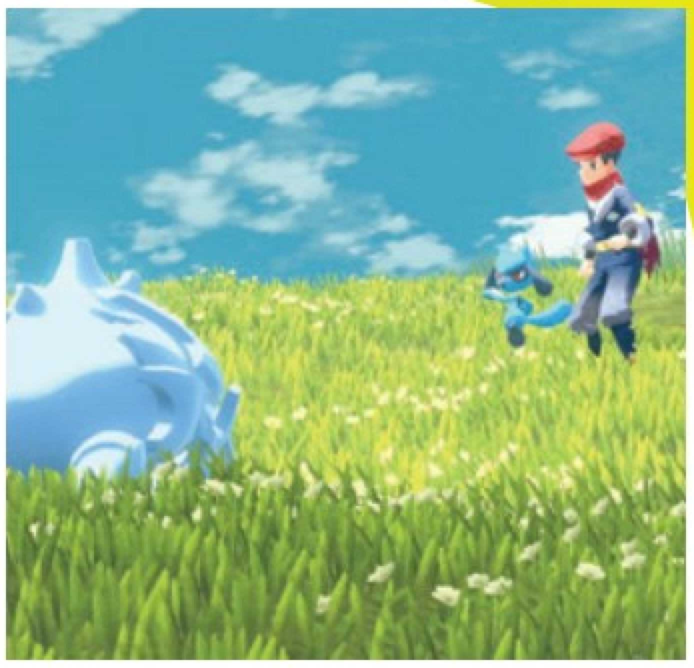


## Tinykin

Tinykin's first impression recalls Pikmin, but jumping on a bar of soap to glide around its large levels proves it is a platformer first, and a truly great one at that. Controlling and exploring Tinykin's world feels fantastic, and all its other mechanics just add to the sublime experience.

## Metal: Hellsinger

Best
Shooter



**editor pick**

## POKÉMON ARCEUS

Transporting you to the days before Diamond and Pearl's Sinnoh region had its current name and Pokémon weren't yet seen as partners, Pokémon Legends: Arceus provides a unique take on the series. Tasked with creating the region's first Pokédex, the player must not only explore various open segments of the Hisui region (as it was known then) but also study its various inhabitants and calm multiple enraged creatures through unique boss battles. In a year where we got not one but two massive Pokémon RPGs, Pokémon Legends: Arceus carved its own identity, even in a crowded landscape. – **BRIAN SHEA**

**editor pick**

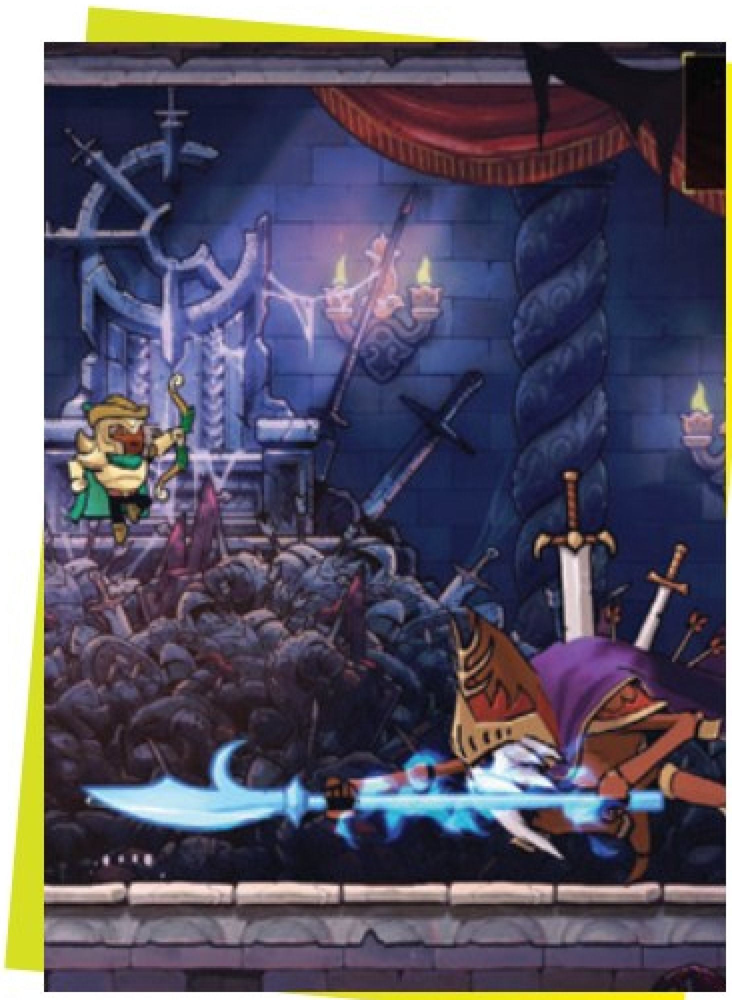
## STRAY

There are dozens of games that let players control a cat, but Stray may be the first truly letting you roleplay as the fuzzy critter. Stray's protagonist isn't a wisecracking, bipedal mascot with a vacuum or a fantasy race that happens to be furry with pointed ears. They move like a cat, react like a cat, and even get annoyed like a cat when you try to give them a backpack. That would have been enough, but controlling a cat against the backdrop of a neon-soaked, apocalyptic, future sci-fi world is what makes Stray truly special. – **KYLE HILLIARD**

# Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II

The best thing we can say about Modern Warfare II is that it's exactly the same. No, really. That's fantastic. Modern Warfare II is more of the same best-in-class multiplayer we've loved for years. Dropping into a level like Shoot House or Shipment and blowing through 100 idiots has never been better.

**Best**
**Competitive**



**editor pick**

## ROGUE LEGACY 2

Rogue Legacy 2 retains the winning formula of the original down to a tee, but don't let that fool you into thinking it offers nothing new. Besides sporting a sharper art direction, expanded class abilities make each role, from archers to chefs, feel more distinct. The run-based action platforming is as tight and challenging as ever, with the addition of helpful relics raising your chances for success. While these changes are great, the core loop – running generations of warriors through a sprawling, ever-changing castle – remains as enthralling as ever. Rogue Legacy 2 is Rogue Legacy perfected.

**– MARCUS STEWART**

**editor pick**

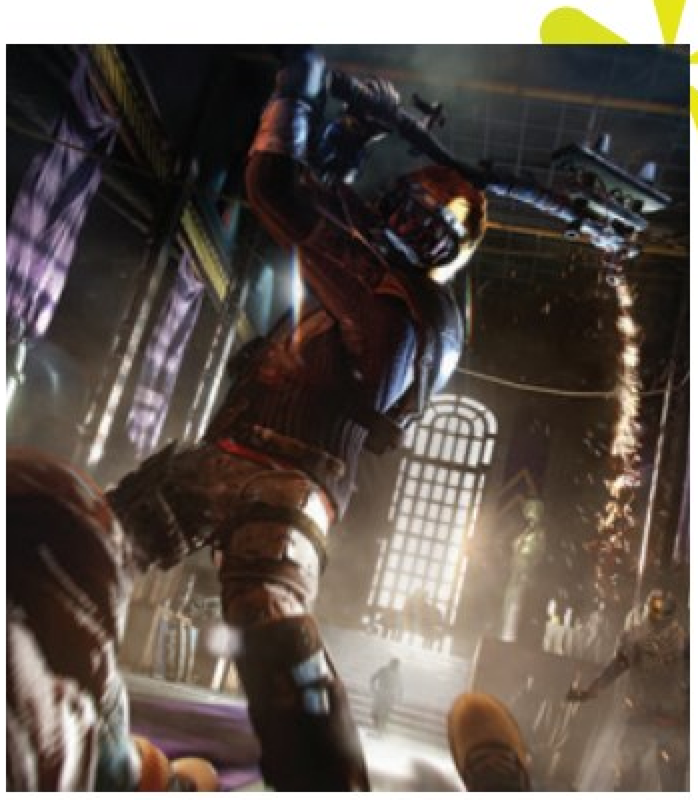
## POKÉMON SCARLET & VIOLET

Pokémon Scarlet & Violet is a true evolution of the series, fusing traditional gameplay with an open-world format. Developer Game Freak has eliminated random encounters, monsters roam the countryside, and players can complete gyms in any order. On top of that, seamless four-player co-op means you can explore the whole game with up to three of your friends. And memorable characters like Arven, Nemona, and the Professors make this one of the best narratives the franchise has ever had. The games have their fair share of struggles, but our time spent in the Paldea region was undeniably delightful. **– CHARLES HARTE**

Best
Simulation

## Two Point Campus

editor pick



## DYING LIGHT 2 STAY HUMAN

Few game environments are as fun to traverse as those in Dying Light 2. Sure, the story suffers from over 40,000 lines of mediocre dialogue, but they're worth sitting through to chase after the amazing flow state Techland has become so skilled at creating. With so many methods of free-form parkour to master – clambering rooftops, wall-running, paragliding, sliding, and swinging – you can truly carve your own path through the gorgeous, zombie-infested European cityscapes.

**– ALEX VAN AKEN**

## Atreus – God of War Ragnarök

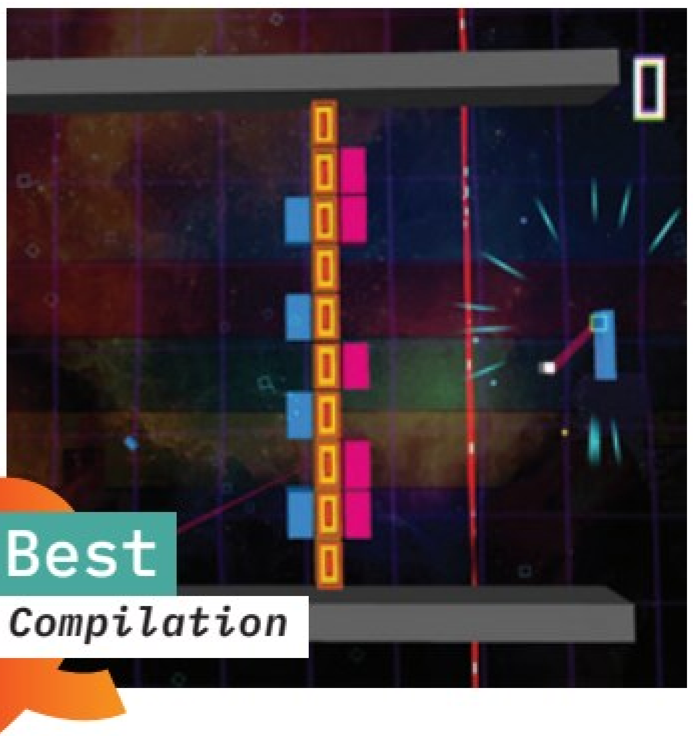
God of War Ragnarök finally gives its supporting cast their time in the spotlight, and no character shined brighter than Atreus.

Atreus is still a kid, but crucially, he's entering his teen years. On top of managing the high expectations of his emotionally stunted father, he's also dealing with the trials and tribulations of growing up, carving his path while wrestling with newfound responsibilities.

Atreus turns Ragnarök into a surprisingly touching coming-of-age story. From watching the young god wrestle with his anger and navigate his first crush, to finally going it alone, seeing the character grow up was the best character moment of 2022.

## Atari 50: The Anniversary Celebration

The retro-compilation masters at Digital Eclipse celebrated Atari's 50th anniversary in style. Though it features more than 90 games to play, Atari 50 is most notable for its extensive interactive museum featuring digital relics of the past, plus interviews with Atari alums and industry luminaries.



Best
*Compilation*

editor pick

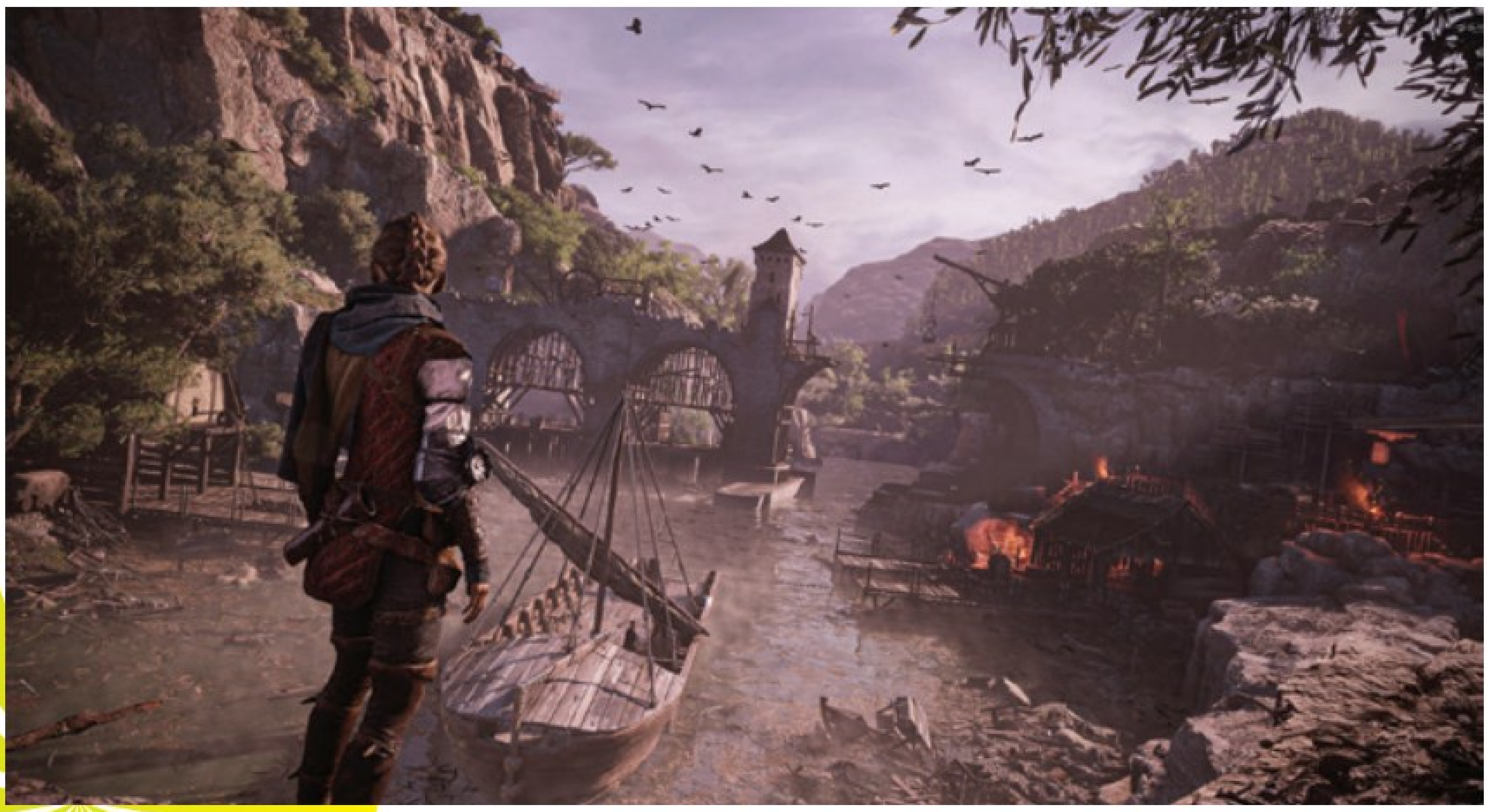
## LEGO STAR WARS: THE SKYWALKER SAGA

I adore the original Lego Star Wars, so I was excited beyond words when I heard they were making an updated version. Somehow, Traveller's Tales blew those unrealistic expectations out of the water; Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga is the best Lego game ever made. It's ambitious, with over 300 characters, dozens of planets to visit, and a complete mechanical overhaul. That classic Lego charm still exists in full force, too, with slapstick cutscenes sure to spread giggles across a new generation of kids. For Lego and Star Wars fans, this game is a must-play. – **CHARLES HARTE**

editor pick

## A PLAGUE TALE REQUIEM

Asobo Studio frontloaded A Plague Tale Requiem with more of the same from A Plague Tale Innocence, and those opening 10 hours might be disheartening to players looking for something new. But when it opens in the second half, in combat, exploration, and its world, Requiem shines. It features a heartfelt and heartbreaking story about a sister-brother bond forged in their ability to persevere when an inescapable force continues to threaten all they know. Its performances, visuals, and score are just as beautiful as the game's narrative, making the final package a worthy follow-up to 2019's Innocence. – **WESLEY LEBLANC**



Best
*Villain*

## Odin – God of War Ragnarök

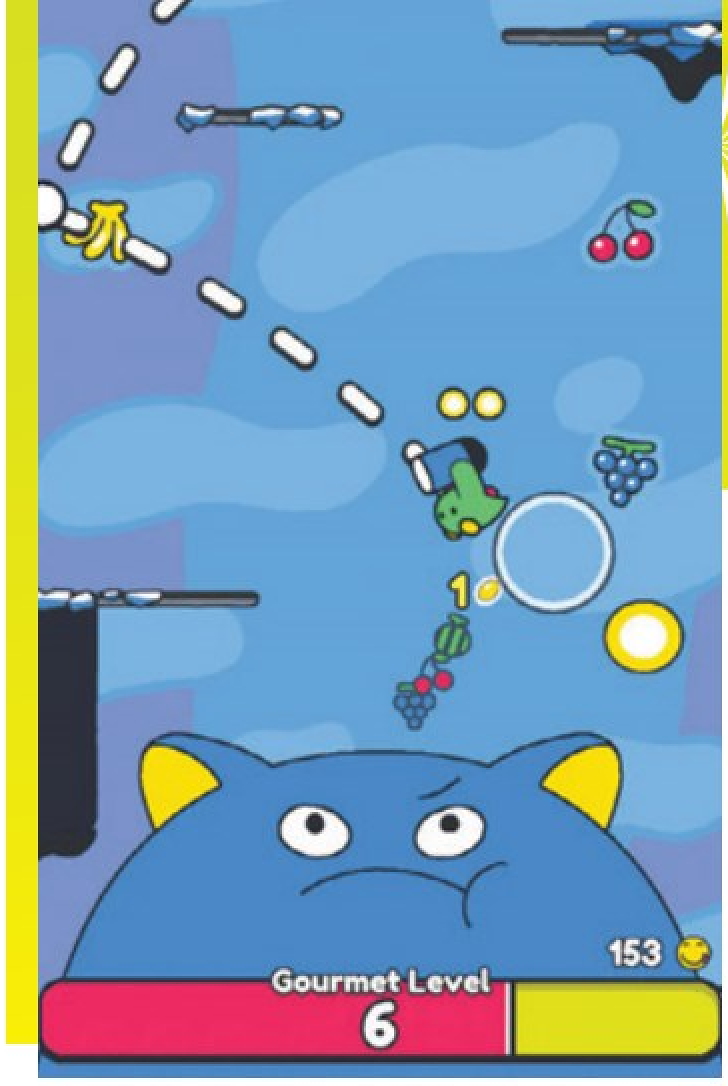
Kratos has fought dozens of villainous gods whose reputation precedes them, but Odin's characterization in Ragnarök in the hands of actor Richard Schiff stands above. Odin is manipulative, abusive, conniving, and evil – but we couldn't help but be enraptured every time he appeared onscreen.

## Pentiment

When it comes to mystery and history, the details are the most important thing. Luckily, that's where Pentiment soars. Its top-notch world-building and art direction elevate this touching story about a 16th-century artist to one of the best games this year.

**Best**
*Microsoft Exclusive*

Don't let him run you ragged, boy.



editor pick

## POINPY

Poinpy is a mobile game with a cute, Kirby-like aesthetic about a little green monster jumping for its life. Made by Downwell creator Ojiro Fumoto, Poinpy has the player trying to combo jumps to gather fruits and veggies in a deliciously satisfying gameplay loop. Customizing equipment allows for many different playstyles, which I had lots of fun experimenting with. And players that reach the conclusion will experience one of the wildest endings of 2022. Whether I was bouncing around to kill time or frantically trying to top my high score, Poinpy was one of my favorite mobile games this year.

**– CHARLES HARTE** ■

## MultiVersus

**Best**
*Fighting*

# Editor Top Games of 2022

### MATT MILLER

1. God of War Ragnarök
2. Elden Ring
3. Marvel's Midnight Suns
4. Destiny 2: The Witch Queen
5. Vampire Survivors
6. Chained Echoes
7. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge
8. Horizon Forbidden West
9. As Dusk Falls
10. Tunic

### KYLE HILLIARD

1. Elden Ring
2. God of War Ragnarök
3. Tinykin
4. Vampire Survivors
5. Kirby and the Forgotten Land
6. Signalis
7. Xenoblade Chronicles 3
8. Poinpy
9. Somerville
10. Pokémon Scarlet & Violet

### BRIAN SHEA

1. God of War Ragnarök
2. Pokémon Legends: Arceus
3. Marvel Snap
4. Vampire Survivors
5. Horizon Forbidden West
6. Marvel's Midnight Suns
7. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge
8. Pokémon Scarlet & Violet
9. Sonic Frontiers
10. Splatoon 3

## MARCUS STEWART

1. Elden Ring
2. Neon White
3. Vampire Survivors
4. Citizen Sleeper
5. God of War Ragnarök
6. Norco
7. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge
8. Tinykin
9. Tunic
10. Yu-Gi-Oh! Master Duel

## WESLEY LEBLANC

1. Elden Ring
2. God of War Ragnarök
3. Citizen Sleeper
4. Stranger of Paradise: Final Fantasy Origin
5. Marvel Snap
6. Norco
7. Metal: Hellsinger
8. Tunic
9. Signalis
10. Fortnite

## ALEX VAN AKEN

1. Elden Ring
2. Fortnite
3. Signalis
4. Neon White
5. Kirby and the Forgotten Land
6. Stray
7. World of Warcraft: Dragonflight
8. Shovel Knight Dig
9. Marvel Snap
10. Dying Light 2

## BLAKE HESTER

1. Neon White
2. Immortality
3. Elden Ring
4. Ghostwire: Tokyo
5. Fortnite
6. Bayonetta 3
7. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II (multiplayer)
8. Kirby and the Forgotten Land
9. OlliOlli World
10. God of War Ragnarök

## CHARLES HARTE

1. Tunic
2. God of War Ragnarök
3. Immortality
4. Fortnite
5. Vampire Survivors
6. Pokémon Legends: Arceus
7. Elden Ring
8. Marvel Snap
9. Kirby and the Forgotten Land
10. Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga

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## DEATH STRANDING 2

Missed connections

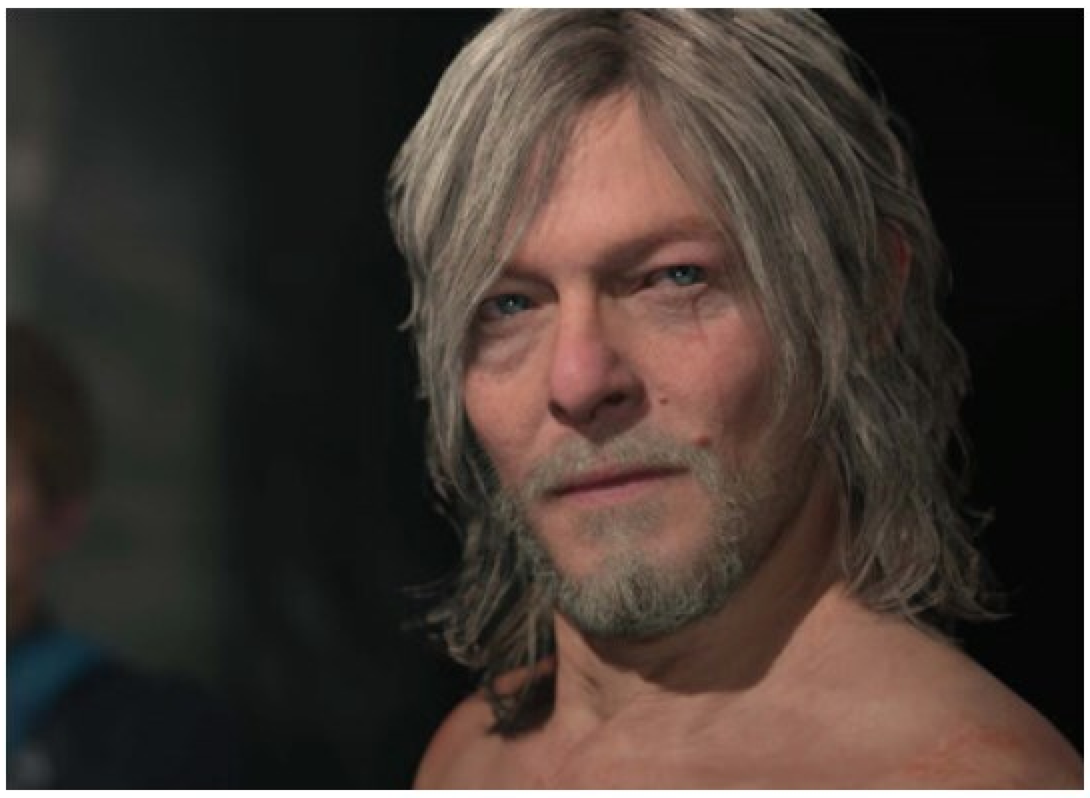
During The Game Awards 2022, Hideo Kojima revealed Death Stranding 2. Or DS2. Or Death Stranding 2 (Working Title). For some reason, it has a lot of names, none of which are its actual title, which wasn't officially announced. Let's just go with DS2.

The four-minute trailer begins with a shot of a small child's room. Toys litter the floor, and a chart on the wall keeps track of a child's height. Interestingly, marking the chart are black hand marks, an apparent homage to the recurring motif of the first game's handprints representing when invisible Beached Things showed up.

We then cut to what appears to be a funeral procession, though it's not entirely clear who it is for. Dozens of people in red garb march through an alien desert underneath an impossibly large rock structure. Despite being a series deeply rooted in sci-fi, this is one of the most bizarre-looking environments we've yet seen in Death Stranding. For all its futuristic aesthetics in items and character design, the first game's world stayed fairly grounded, primarily looking like a truncated version of Iceland despite taking place in the United States.

From here, Fragile, played again by Lea Sedoux (*No Time to Die*), is shown playing in the child's room before some kind of invasion forces her to escape with the child from an underground bunker. Driving off on an electric unicycle only gets them so far before she's gunned down, forcing herself and the child to plummet from the bike. We get a quick shot of the ostensible shooter, who looks eerily similar to Higgs, the antagonist from the first game, played by Troy Baker (The Last of Us). We get a quick cut to the area around Fragile on fire, and the baby far out of reach. She crawls desperately for the child before collapsing. Then, preceeding the title card drop (for those wondering, the game is called "DS2" at this moment), we see a BB magically appear in a BB pod. A voiceover from Higgs says, "BB, don't worry. It's okay," before an animated logo for something called Drawbridge plays out onscreen.

It's not immediately clear what Drawbridge is, but it looks like a play on the company logo for Bridges in the first game, the fictional organization working to reconnect the United States. The text under the logo says, "Both stick and rope, to protect and connect. Together, for tomorrow." This text refers to Kobo Abe's story "The Rope," which says the two are man's oldest tools – the stick to keep evil away and the rope to pull good in. Kojima cited this as an inspiration when working on the original Death Stranding.



Voiceover plays one side of a conversation, empathizing with someone over the immense loss they've experienced but urging them not to hold onto their sadness.

Fragile appears again, but this time she's joined by Death Stranding protagonist Sam Porter Bridges, played again by Norman Reedus (*The Walking Dead*) now inexplicably sporting a grey head of hair. The two stare out over a black, inky body of water. A massive, floating vessel emerges as Fragile tells Sam to "Come meet my crew." The Drawbridge logo is on the side of the ship. "It's time for you to hit the road and start a new journey," Fragile says.

We hear one final disembodied voiceover, saying, "It wasn't the UCA [United Cities of America] that made the final decision," the voice says. "It was APAC, a private corporation."

The trailer ends with Higgs playing "BB's Theme 2022" on guitar, a new take on a theme song from the first game. However, his usual outfit is gone, replaced with a striking metallic red body of armor that both exposes his internal organs and features a mask shaped like that of Sam's sister, Samantha America "Amelie" Strand. Or at least it might be Higgs; a last-second shot casts doubt on this theory, as it looks like it might be Samantha herself.

The trailer ends with the text, "Should we have connected?" An interesting idea, as it undercuts the entire premise of the first game: to connect everyone in the country back together.

Despite how weird it is, the first Death Stranding tells a remarkably simple and straightforward story within its own fiction. I'd have to imagine DS2 will be no different, but with a bunch of clips thrown at us out of context, it's impossible to know what's happening.

Here's what we do know, though: as of right now, the game is planned for PlayStation 5. The first game also came to PC via Game Pass, so it could be the case for its sequel. DS2 also features Elle Fanning (*The Neon Demon*) and Shioli Kutsuna (*Deadpool 2*), though they aren't in the trailer. Ever the humble creator, the Kojima Productions website says, "As with all of his past masterpieces, the latest title will be produced, written, directed and designed by Hideo Kojima himself." No release date was given.

**BY BLAKE HESTER**

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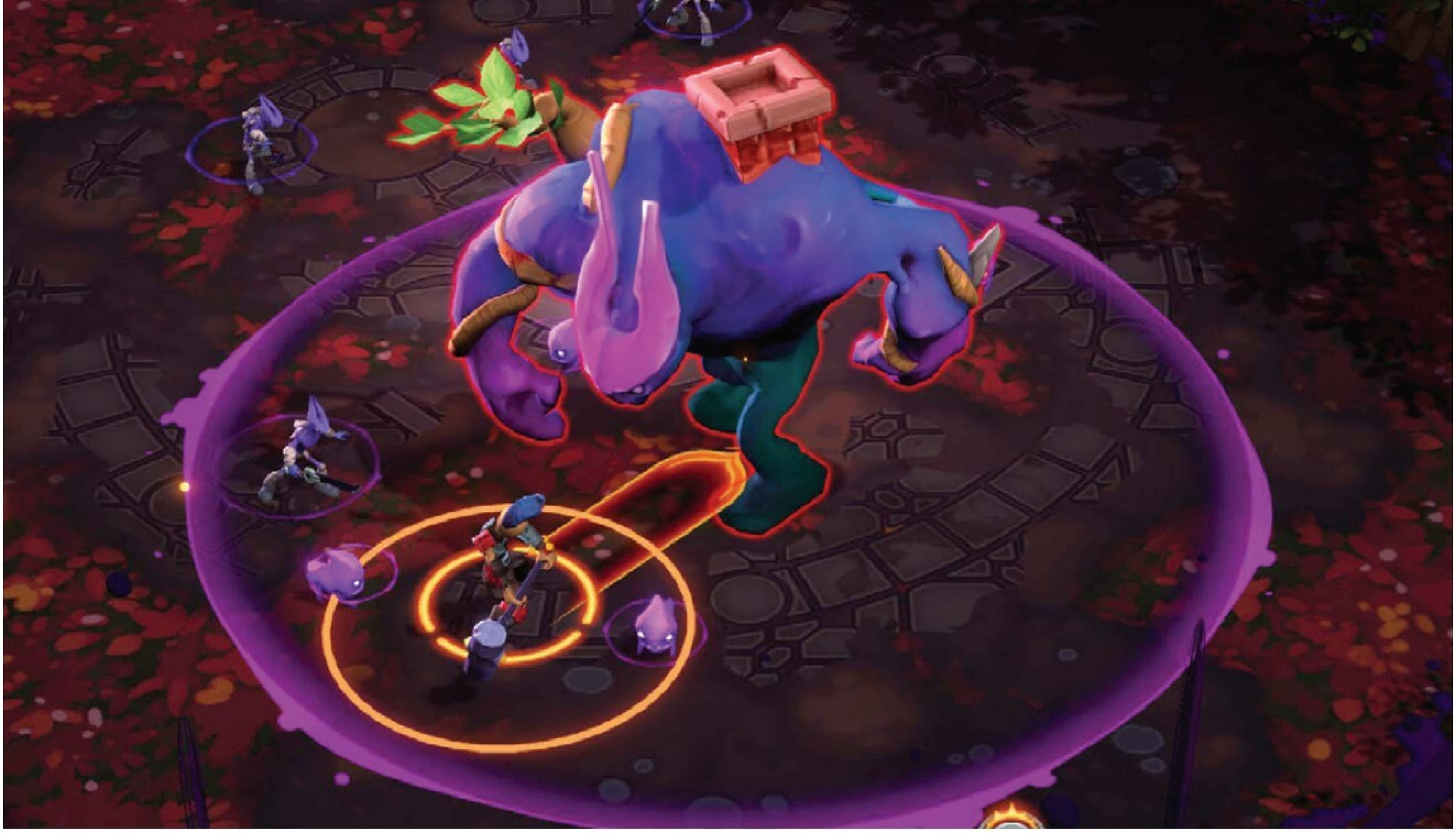
**PLATFORM** PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
**PUBLISHER** Sony Interactive Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Kojima Productions **RELEASE** TBA



# INKBOUND

## Tactical multiplayer book reading

Shiny Shoe enjoyed an unexpected hit with Monster Train in 2020. We gave the game a 9 in our review and wrote about how appealing it is for fans of roguelikes and deck-building. Shiny Shoe's follow-up, Inkbound, is not a sequel, but we were so impressed with the developer's previous outing that we were eager to see what world and game mechanics it wanted to explore next.

I spent an hour playing Inkbound with Shiny Shoe's co-founder, Mark Cooke, and the game's creative director, Andrew Krausnick. I started the game by customizing a character and picking a class to take into the universe of Athenium. "In this universe, all the worlds come from books that have been written," Cooke says. The void where I begin the game feels broken and unstable. The idea is the world has been torn apart by monstrous villains, and it's up to the player to restore it by finding books filled with unique lands and entering them to destroy the invaders and bring the world back to its original brilliance.

Combat is turn-based, but there is much more strategy related to your placement than in the average RPG. When you encounter enemies, you are both in a large circle with complete freedom of movement. Before executing a turn, you can go wherever you want, but the distance traveled will affect your turn points. You can stand in one place and use all your points to execute attacks, or you can use your points to move about. During my time, I gained advantages by moving myself into positions where I could use a single attack on two enemies or get out of the way of dangerous elements on the field, like poison about to be dropped. "Overall, I'd describe our combat system as a mash-up of turn-based Diablo with MOBA skills," Krausnick says.

After getting through the opening tutorials, Krausnick joined my game with his character and we began our run. Inkbound's gameplay is unique, but its closest relatable genre is tactics. Instead of making your way through a specific story, you attempt runs alone or with up to three friends. Krausnick directed me to three books, each offering a different boss and location to pursue.

The way multiplayer selection happens in Inkbound limits menu access. In the world, I pointed to the book I was interested in attempting, and our run did not begin until Krausnick agreed and pointed to the same one. There is no menu-based voting.

After selecting our book and boss, we started our run. Playing with another is similar to playing by yourself, but your partner makes their own tactical decisions. You enter your strategic choices, and they enter theirs simultaneously. Everything plays out with the enemy taking their own turn, and then the next round begins. The action is active and does not punish you for taking your time, but it doesn't necessarily reward you for going fast either. You approach each encounter at your own speed.

Between each major enemy encounter, you can select upgrades to carry forward with you for the remainder of your run, but those are not permanent. Inkbound is a roguelike in that sense, but there are opportunities to unlock permanent customizations.

Krausnick and I barely made it to the final boss, Argoloth, terror of the inky depths, after several enemy encounters and character upgrades. One of the creature's violent tentacles took me out, but Krausnick pulled through to finally defeat the boss, and I got to enjoy the rewards of victory, despite not being alive for the full fight.

Inkbound will be free-to-play with cosmetic monetization and is entering early access later this year.

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**PLATFORM** PC
**STYLE** 1-Player Tactics (4-Player Online)
**PUBLISHER** Shiny Shoe
**DEVELOPER** Shiny Shoe **RELEASE** 2023

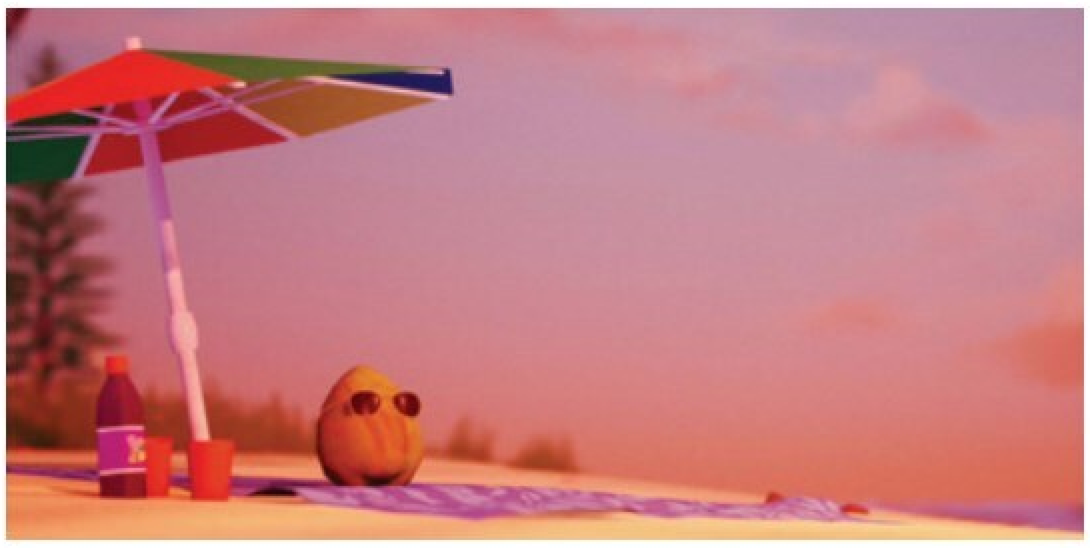
# TCHIA

## Blissful exploration

We've had our eyes on Tchia for some time and even traveled to New Caledonia, the island serving as the direct inspiration for the game's landscape (issue 352), but now we've finally had a chance to spend some real time with the game.

In Tchia, you are the titular Tchia, exploring an idyllic and lush island filled with secrets but light on danger. It doesn't take long to recognize the Breath of the Wild inspirations as Tchia can climb any surface, float by holding a glider over her head, and explore in any direction the player chooses.

My first task is finding a crab for a surly woman with a shotgun, and the scene introducing her quickly establishes the game's impressive animation. The characters have a simple cartoon design, but their movement is fluid and interesting. I head south to an 'X' on the map, but no on-map cursor is directing me. I have a compass, but all Tchia offers if I need to know exactly where I am is a general idea. It sounds needlessly opaque in writing, but it works well in practice. The map is detailed, and the landscape is diverse enough that figuring out where you are is not difficult, and to see Tchia's large circle and hear her say that she thinks you're around this area when you pull up the map is charming.



I find the crab, put it in my pocket, take it back to the woman, and am thrust into a simple but enjoyable cooking minigame about wrapping and frying meat. Moments later, I am on stage playing ukulele for a crowd of neighbors, enjoying the fruits of my crab search.

You can play the musical minigame if you want, but you can also turn on autoplay and enjoy the party like a cutscene. The ukulele is available to play at any rest spot on the map. The options for making music are impressive, with different buttons dictating chords versus single strings, and you can hold the triggers for flat and sharp notes. Talented players will no doubt be able to play complete songs with it.

After the party, the shotgun woman, who has already warmed up to Tchia, gives me a map and a treasure chest key. I am more or less free to do what I want. There is a mark on the northern part of my map, so I head in that direction. Tchia can climb just about any tree, sit on top, and sway back and forth to slingshot herself into the sky. Not only is the motion fun, but I could cover big swaths of ground by slinging myself into the distance and throwing up my glider to land safely.

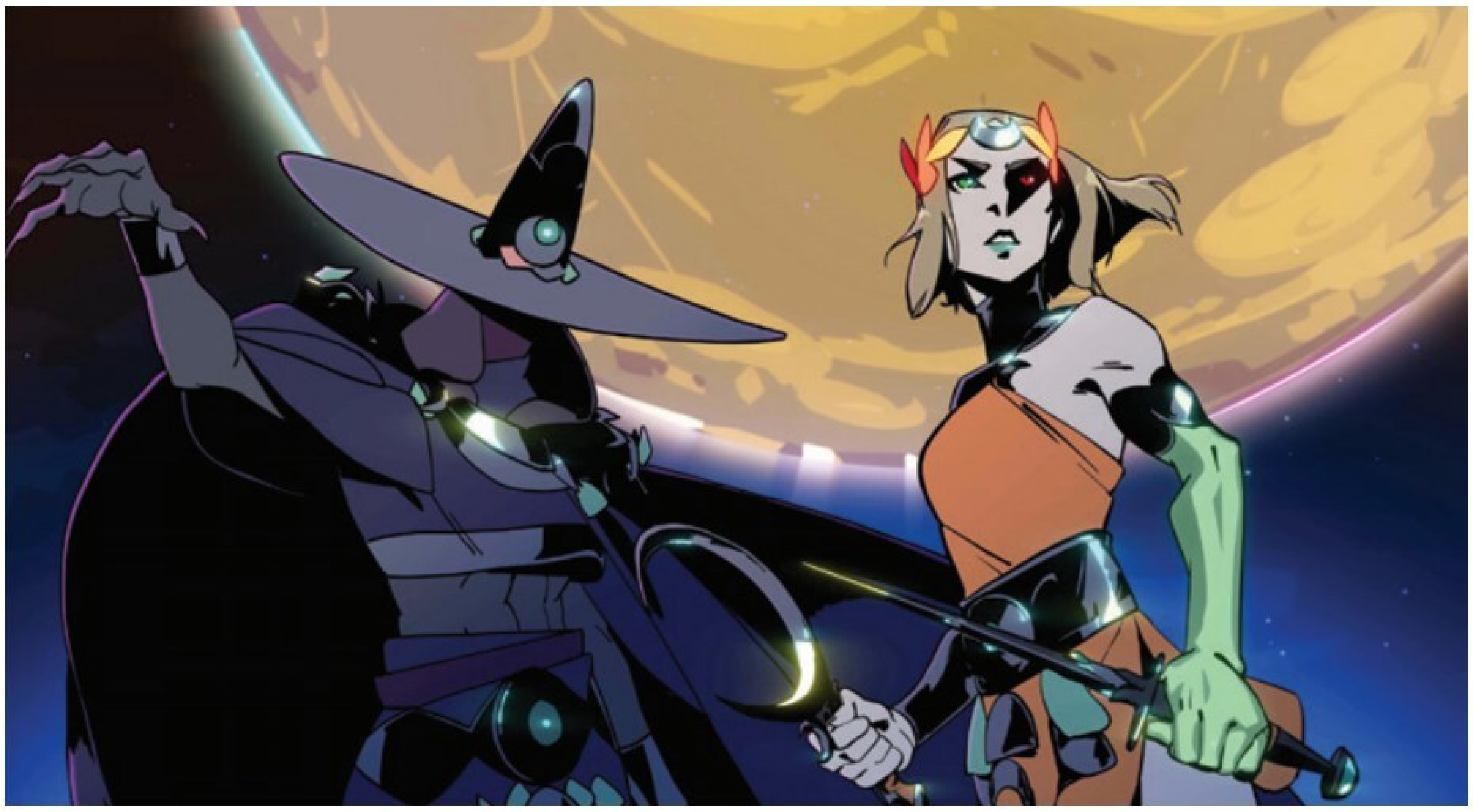
In my continued exploration, I found a gigantic sparkling tooth embedded in the ground. I pry off a piece, use it as an explosive, and blow up a nearby statue. I come across a group of enchanted fabrics I destroy by throwing nearby lanterns at them.

I also found several treasure chests filled with different clothing options and used Tchia's transformation ability extensively. Tchia can turn into almost anything she sees on the island. I spent time rolling around as a rock, climbing the mountain as a deer, digging into the ground as a boar, and pooping from the sky as a bird.

My time with Tchia played like I was exploring a realized tropical island, as well as the imagination of a child. Launching from trees and transforming into animals to explore are things a curious young kid would imagine while walking around in the woods. Tchia does a good job of evoking that sense of wonderment I struggle to recall more and more as I get older. I look forward to seeing everything Tchia offers later this year.

**BY KYLE HILLIARD**

**PLATFORM** PS5 • PS4 • PC
**STYLE** 1-Player Action
**PUBLISHER** Awaceb **DEVELOPER** Awaceb
**RELEASE** 2023



# HADES II

Gift from the gods

Since its founding in 2009, developer Supergiant Games has never made a sequel. The demand has always been there, but the developers have repeatedly stated that they weren't interested. Needless to say, when Hades II got a surprise reveal at The Game Awards, everyone was caught off guard.

The trailer shows an animated short of a mysterious woman with a red laurel crown sparring with a witch wearing a massive hat. While we don't learn her name in the trailer, we now know the first woman is Melinoë, the immortal Princess of the Underworld. If her title didn't tip you off, she's the brother of Zagreus, the first game's protagonist. Apart from the laurels, she has a translucent green left arm that leaves her bones visible, fiery glowing feet, and a moon resting on her forehead.

Instead of facing off against Hades himself, the main villain in Hades II appears to be Chronos, the Titan of Time. In Greek mythology, the Titans are a group of god-like beings even older than the gods. Chronos is the father of many gods from the first game, including Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades. The end of the reveal trailer shows Hades bound in chains, warning Melinoë against facing Chronos. It seems unlikely she will heed this advice.

While Melinoë is similar to Zagreus in many ways, the combat in Hades 2 will be different. There are new weapons, including a sickle/dagger combo and a magical staff. It seems fair to assume there will be more than just those two (the original game had six), though it's unclear if any weapons will return from Zagreus' adventure. Melinoë also has access to gifts from new gods, including Apollo, a character noticeably absent from the first game. On this front, there will definitely be some familiar faces; the Supergiant FAQ specifically lists Zeus as a returning boon.

Other than Zeus and Hades, we haven't seen any other returning characters yet, but there are plenty of newcomers. Both Nemesis and Moros appear, two characters that are traditionally the children of Nyx, a major character in the first game. There's also a shade named Dora, which might be short for Pandora, though that's purely speculation.

The most interesting character revealed is Hecate, the witch from the trailer's opening sequence. Known as the goddess of witchcraft, she appears friendly with Melinoë, who refers to her as "headmistress" in a screenshot of the game. It's worth noting that the Hades II FAQ specifically describes Melinoë as "a witch and sorceress with powerful magical abilities," so the teacher/student relationship would make a lot of sense. Hecate is also associated with the moon, and Melinoë has a silver moon in the center of her laurel crown. Later footage depicts Hecate as a boss, perhaps as a test Melinoë must pass to proceed on her quest to kill Chronos.

While the original Hades was one of the most critically acclaimed games of 2020, Supergiant says you won't need to play the first game to enjoy the sequel. You also don't need to know anything about Greek mythology, though learning more about both would likely deepen your appreciation in the end.

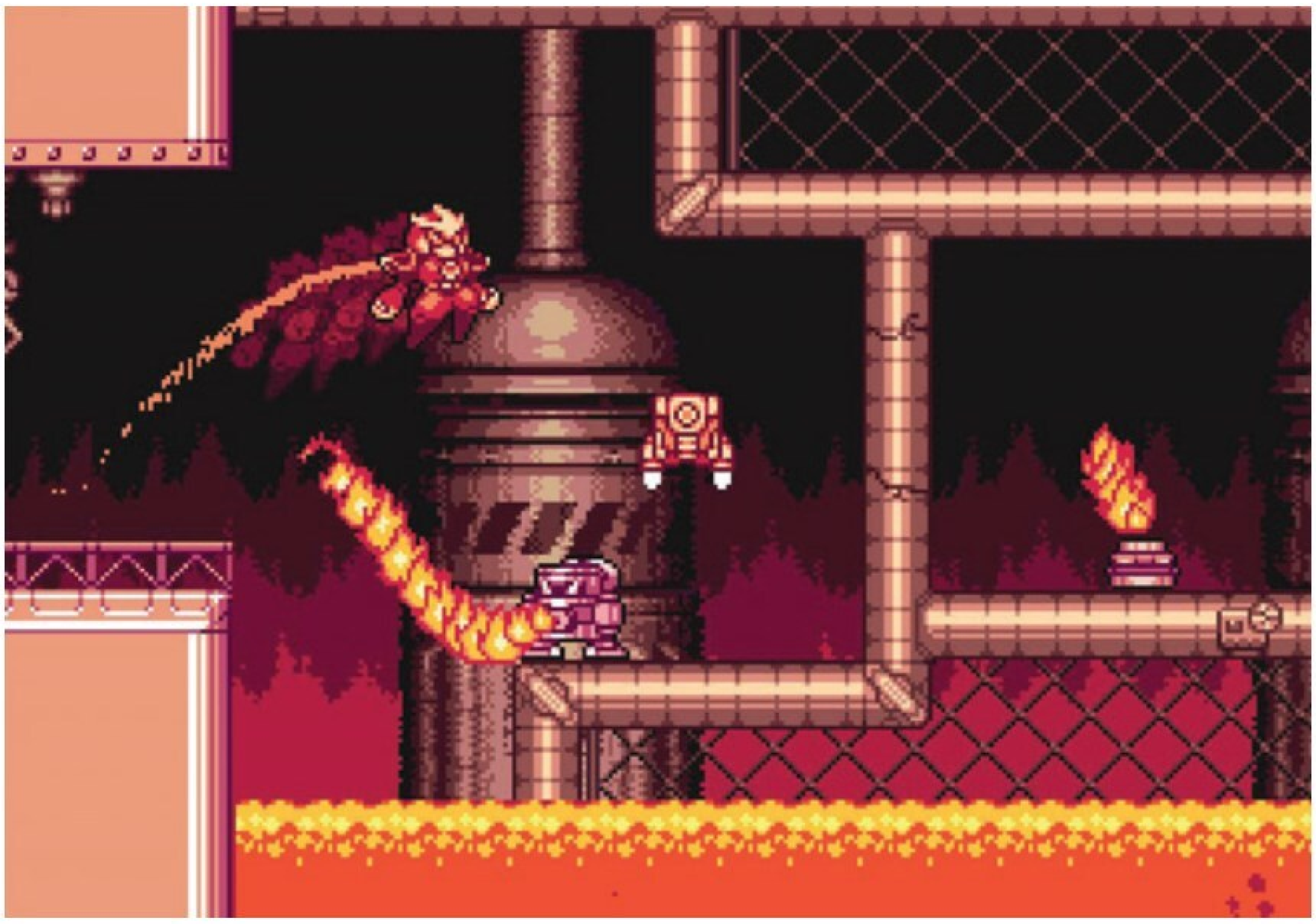
Hades II does not currently have a release date, but Supergiant says to expect news about Early Access sometime in 2023. The game will also come to consoles, though there won't be a complete platform list until closer to the game's launch.

**BY CHARLES HARTE**

**PLATFORM** PC (Consoles TBA)
**STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Supergiant Games
**DEVELOPER** Supergiant Games **RELEASE** TBA

# GRAVITY CIRCUIT

Hooked on ’tronics



Gravity Circuit channels the slick retro action of Mega Man X and Ninja Gaiden into an already impressive experience. The brainchild of small indie developer Domesticated Ant Games, players control a warrior named Kai on a mission to battle an evil army in a post-apocalyptic, robot-occupied world.

Kai dishes out justice using melee combat consisting of forward punch combos, rising uppercuts and Pelé kicks, and mid-air dive kicks. Crushing enemies fills a meter that fuels special attacks such as a Street Fighter-style hurricane kick and other flashy assaults.

A grappling hook gives Kai his biggest edge, however. In addition to using it to swing across gaps or suspend himself from platforms, it can deal offensive damage from a distance. Best of all, you can yank the metallic heap of defeated foes to carry and toss at other targets. The hook can even repel certain projectiles, such as homing missiles. This mechanic adds a fun and strategic wrinkle to combat.

You can outfit Kai with a variety of chips to enhance his capabilities. Upgrades include a double jump, increased melee range, knockback negation, and more. You can equip up to three of these perks anytime, allowing you to edit your loadout to deal with specific hazards or enemies mid-level.

Challenging stages push your mastery of Kai’s platforming abilities, including his wall-to-wall jumping and downward slide. The difficulty feels akin to classic Mega Man from what we’ve played so far, but it doesn’t seem insurmountable to the point of frustration. Old-school fans will enjoy the bite without alienating a more casual audience.

Gravity Circuit is shaping up to become one of the most promising indies of 2023, but don’t take our word for it. A free Steam demo offers a great appetizer until it launches for PlayStation, Switch, and PC later this year. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

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**PLATFORM** PS5 • PS4 • Switch • PC
**STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** PID Games
**DEVELOPER** Domesticated Ant Games **RELEASE** 2023

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# MIKA AND THE WITCH'S MOUNTAIN

## Hex stranding

Developer Nukefist and publisher Chibig announced Mika and The Witch's Mountain last year, and it immediately gave off a cozy and witchy vibe I was excited to experience. The "Mika" in the title appears to be the young witch featured in all the game's trailers thus far. Aspiring to become a full-fledged witch, she uses her flying broom to help local townsfolk with their packages and other favors.

The visual style and charm of Mika and The Witch's Mountain are what caught my eye as it's bright, cheery, whimsical, and the antithesis of what I think of when I hear the word "witch." It features beautifully animated cutscenes, and the gameplay reminds me of other adventure games like A Short Hike and the upcoming Tchia. Perhaps those are some high visual bars to set for this game, but everything else going on in trailers released for Mika and The Witch's Mountain so far seems to indicate it might live up to them.

"Mika and The Witch's Mountain is a fantasy adventure about an aspiring witch who delivers packages to the townspeople of a small island," the game's description reads. "Explore every cranny and soar through the sky with your magic broom."

That magic broom is core to everything happening in-game. Mika uses this broom to traverse the tropical locale she calls home, and wind traps scattered around it add some platforming elements to her flying. What's especially neat is that, like a true witch, Mika can summon her broom anytime, be it from the ground or up high on a clifftop. The broom also doubles as her on-the-go mail vehicle. Mika can carry packages herself, but the broom can too. It can also carry things like fishbowls to help locals collect fish, and it looks like you can customize it with kites that hang down from the top of her broom for a colorful display in the sky.

I love witchy aesthetics and the magic associated with them, so I'm hoping customization is a big part of Mika and The Witch's Mountain. One aspect of the game that hasn't been touched on too much is its story. Chibig and Nukefist call this a coming-of-age adventure, and trailers hint at a full-fledged witch that lives atop a mountain that looms large over the village below.

"Mika is an aspiring witch who must embark on a journey to the top of the mountain," the game's Steam page reads. "There, the answers to many questions about life and magic await her, but also the end of a journey of personal growth and self-discovery."

To reach the top, Mika must deliver packages for the local delivery company while obtaining newer and better brooms. These better brooms allow Mika to soar higher to the top of this island mountain and further explore the game's "mini-open world." Obtaining new brooms sounds dependent on your work as a delivery witch. If you complete deliveries successfully without getting the package wet or breaking it, the recipients (your neighbors) will be happy and fill up your delivery card with green, orange, and red stamps to help you advance your journey. What lies at the top of the mountain, other than the witch teased throughout trailers and the "end of a journey," remains a mystery, but it's something I'm excited to learn about when I finally get to go hands-on with it.

When I first saw Mika and The Witch's Mountain, it gave me cozy and warm vibes. I'm not looking for much more than that, so I am hopeful the game delivers on that promise when it hits consoles and PC sometime this year. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

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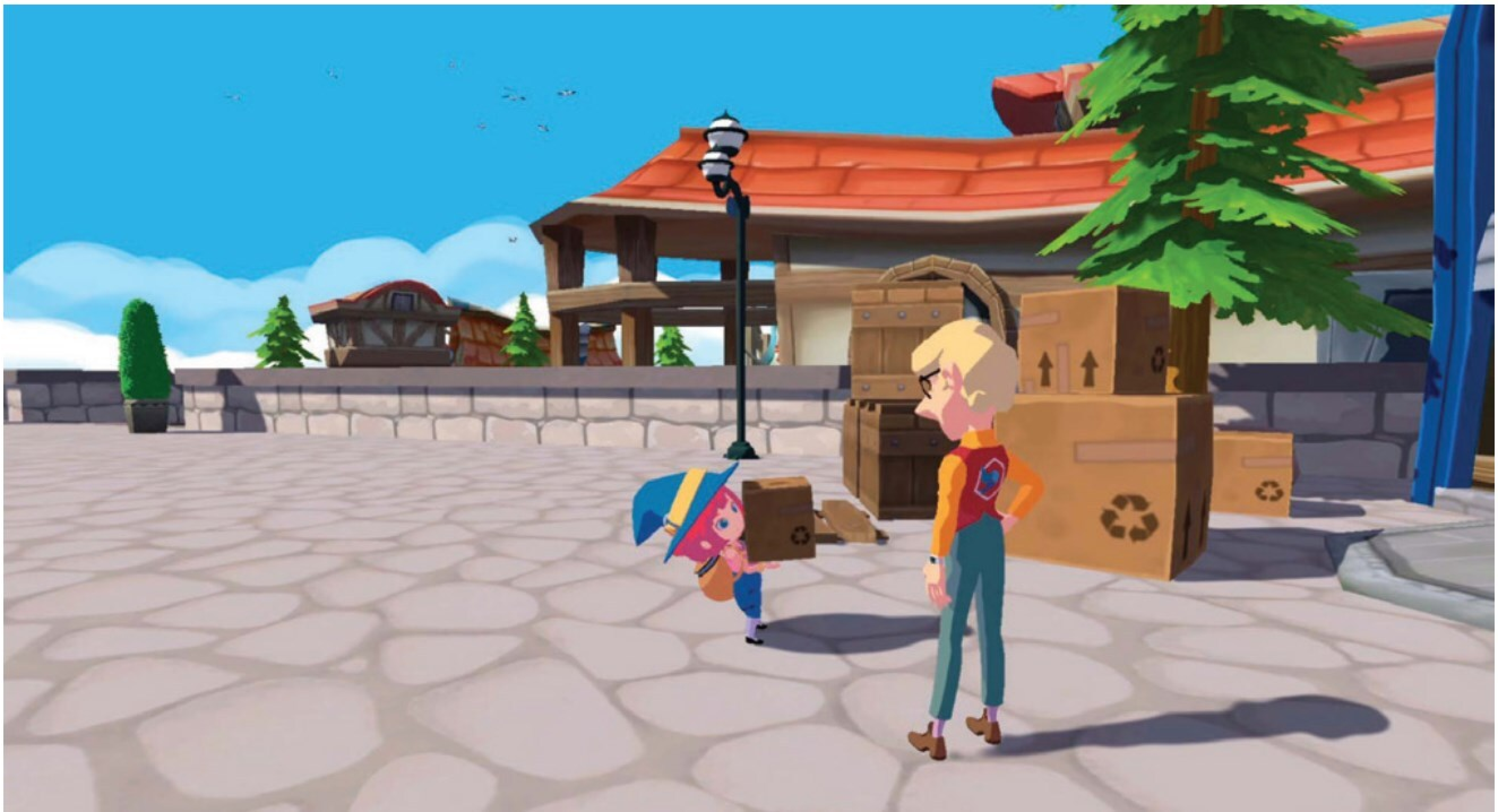
**PLATFORM** PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
**STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Chibig
**DEVELOPER** Nukefist, Chibig **RELEASE** 2023



# JUDAS

Going gaga for this spiritual successor

After nearly a decade of waiting, director Ken Levine and his studio Ghost Story Games have revealed what they are working on – a new IP called Judas that looks excitingly familiar.

System Shock 2 put Levine on the map with gameplay and story praised by almost all who played. Levine went on to direct BioShock, one of the most influential games of all time, at 2K Boston, which would later become Irrational Games. 2K Marin released BioShock 2 while Levine and Irrational worked on what would become 2013's BioShock Infinite. Less than a year after the release of Infinite, Levine announced he was "winding down Irrational Games," starting a "smaller, more entrepreneurial endeavor at Take-Two."

That endeavor became Ghost Story Games, and while Levine waxed poetic about "narrative Legos" at game development conferences, what Ghost Story was working on remained a mystery. A *Bloomberg* report from last year detailed what sounded like troubled development at the studio, with word that Levine's first Ghost Story title was supposed to be out in 2017, amongst other details. With all that rumored trouble, it was a surprise to finally see the reveal of Judas.

While its name, characters, and world are entirely different, Judas looks like a spiritual successor to BioShock in the same way BioShock was a successor to System Shock 2.

"A disintegrating starship. A desperate escape plan. You are the mysterious and troubled Judas," the game's website reads. "Your only hope for survival is to make or break alliances with your worst enemies. Will you work together to fix what you broke – or will you leave it to burn?"

That's all Ghost Story has published about the game, but the Judas reveal trailer paints a much clearer picture. Judas is the game's protagonist, and her survival seems dependent on the status of the starship she's aboard. It appears to be on the brink of calamity, but the trailer indicates that Judas can potentially save it (or let it burn). To do so, Judas will need the help of people whom she might have previously seen as enemies. Judas utilizes a loadout of abilities and weapons that will feel right at home for any BioShock player. Like BioShock's plasmids and Infinite's vigors, Judas appears to have two mechanisms in her hands that allow her to use special abilities, like electricity. Recalling the first use of electricity in BioShock, Judas zaps an enemy in water in the reveal trailer, and it's clear that the immersive sim nature present in all of Levine's games is due for an appearance here.

Even the weapons look familiar, with a pistol Judas holds looking like a more steampunk version of one seen in Infinite. And to add further fuel to the "this is a BioShock spiritual successor" fire, the world seems laden with the in-your-face environmental storytelling that presumably speaks to the game's themes. One poster says, "Entitled: Be grateful for what's given to you," with a girl struggling to eat what appears to be an alien organ while another nearby says, "Perverted: Love is toxic," while two people embrace in a kiss. Wrap all this into one package, and you get something that screams Ken Levine.

Here's hoping that whenever Judas is released, it matches the highs of the BioShock series it's clearly aiming to hit. With Judas, Levine and Ghost Story aren't up against just the BioShock series, but the ever-expanding lineage of games inspired by it and improving on it.

**BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

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**PLATFORM** PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter
**PUBLISHER** Take-Two Interactive **DEVELOPER** Ghost Story Games **RELEASE** TBA

# PGA TOUR

## Driving forward

EA Sports has been producing officially licensed PGA Tour video games since 1990, with stars like Tiger Woods and Rory McIlroy lending their names over the years. However, after 2015, the company took a break from PGA Tour, meaning other franchises have had time to slide into the space.

However, EA Sports is ready to make up for lost time with its newest title. The emphasis this time is on realism, not only in how the players and courses look but also in how players must approach every hole. For starters, developer EA Tiburon created each of the 30 launch courses with the help of the course superintendents, state-of-the-art technology (including helicopters equipped with lasers), and even geologists to ensure the most true-to-life experience for players when they step into the course-accurate tee boxes. Licensed players and realistic crowds also received a keen emphasis, with players from the PGA and LPGA Tours mapped using high-tech cameras in multiple poses to render them in the Frostbite Engine. In addition, the studio scanned actors for the crowd to make them feel like actual people on the course instead of cardboard cutouts.

The four Majors were among the highest priority for the developers, as the PGA Championship, The Open Championship, the U.S. Open, and the Masters all feature custom presentations, highly detailed in-game trophy models, and special commentary, which has been expanded. Players can expect hundreds of hours of content from a broad analysis team to avoid repetitive chitchat while working through the courses. You can also tweak various presentation and gameplay settings, including how dense you want the crowd to be during your round.

When you finally do step up for your first drive, the gameplay leverages ShotLink and Trackman data used for real-world analytics of PGA Tour players for realistic outcomes on every shot. This data allows each bounce and roll to behave accurately across every terrain and slope, and even considers which type of grass grows at each course. In fact, every course in the game has its own physics profile, so playing through a dreary day at The Old Course at St. Andrews Links feels different than a humid round at TPC Sawgrass.

After selecting your club and approaching your ball, you have 20 different shot types to choose from, letting you attack each course how you want to and how the pros do in real life; you can even adjust the shape of your shot's arc to perfect your approach. Using the analog stick to control the swing, players must execute the backswing smoothly and efficiently and time their impact on the ball to maximize results. If you time it just right, you receive a Big Hit Moment, a series trademark where you get a slow-motion view with a dramatic camera angle to emphasize your mastery on that stroke. Once you're on the green, you also control putting with the analog stick with a line that shows how far back to stroke and a shot assist option to help you aim. EA Tiburon hopes to add the traditional three-click control scheme to the game post-launch.

While you can play locally or online in unranked play, tournaments, private matches, and other game modes (including one where 16 players are simultaneously on the course), the destination mode is Career. Unified RPG progression lets you make the decisions for your created player, giving you meaningful choices to build your golfer from the ground up with skills, abilities, and gear to complement the robust customization options. In Career, you can even choose where you want to start, whether that's as an amateur, on the developmental Korn Ferry Tour, or all the way in the PGA Tour; winning championships in the amateur circuit opens invites to more prestigious tournaments, giving you a meaningful feeling of progression.

Though it's been a while since EA Sports released a licensed golf game, PGA Tour looks to pull out all the stops in pursuit of delivering the most realistic experience we've ever seen. Though I've long since fallen off the sim-golf genre, I'm already eyeing my tee time in late March. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

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**PLATFORM** PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
**STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Sports (16-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** EA Sports
**DEVELOPER** EA Tiburon **RELEASE** March 24

# WO LONG: FALLEN DYNASTY

## Rising through the ranks

Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty's public demo gave players a chance to experience a more general idea of what this fast-paced action game offers, but Koei Tecmo recently gave *Game Informer* the chance to go deeper and play through the first two chapters in full. Team Ninja is aiming for a wider swath of players with Wo Long, as opposed to its extremely demanding Nioh games. While Wo Long still features that trademark From Software-inspired challenge, it also features a unique system that allows you to change an enemy's difficulty in real-time, making it much more approachable.

At the core of everything in Wo Long is its unique morale system that rises as you defeat enemies and decreases when you take damage. Take enough damage, and you can fall a full rank. You restore your morale by defeating the enemy that took you out, which feels like collecting souls after death in Dark Souls, and I love its implementation here.

In chapter two, a mini-boss with a morale rank of 20 killed me while my morale was at 17. The higher an enemy's morale, the harder it is to defeat, but uniquely, defeating enemies in the immediate surrounding can often lower an enemy's morale rank. Plus, even though I began this section around morale rank 13, by defeating each enemy on the way to the mini-boss, I got back to 17. What's interesting here is the push and pull between the desire to quickly rush to this mini-boss at a lower morale rank to obtain the morale and experience I lost and the desire to take it slow, build my morale up by defeating enemies along the way, and challenge the boss with higher morale. However, in doing this, I risk dying to one of the dozen enemies along the way. I like deciding how vital my experience and morale were, and I especially enjoy that I can increase my combat power by increasing my morale.

It feels like a built-in hard mode and easy mode. If I'm craving more difficulty, I can challenge a boss with a higher morale rank. If I'm struggling to defeat it, I can farm smaller enemies and build up my morale to be the same as the boss'.

The morale system is so far Wo Long's highlight. It's unique and stressful and adds a new element to the difficult, action-combat genre the Dark Souls series popularized. As From Software continues to perfect its take on this genre, I like seeing developers put their own mark on it, and that's what Team Ninja is doing again with Wo Long.

But that's not the only aspect of Wo Long that impressed me; its combat is slick, fast-paced, and stressful in the best way, even when up against standard mob enemies (which can take you out with ease if you miss just one deflect, block, or dodge). It's the first game to give me the same deflect and dodge thrill and adrenaline that From Software's Sekiro did, and I don't think I can praise Wo Long any higher than that.

The action takes priority, but something surprising about Wo Long is its characters and story. Gone are the obscure and "it's there if you look for it" narrative aspects typically seen in the genre. Instead, Wo Long presents its story with hype-inducing cutscenes, characters with in-your-face personalities, and storytelling that seems to come to me rather than me to it. Perhaps this is the result of playing through the game's opening, but I'm hoping Wo Long continues to roll out its narrative as it did in these first two sections. Fortunately, I don't have to wait much longer to find out. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

**PLATFORM** PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
**STYLE** 1-Player Action (2-Player Online)
**PUBLISHER** Koei Tecmo **DEVELOPER** Team Ninja **RELEASE** March 3

# ARMORED CORE VI: FIRES OF RUBICON

A new soul for the mecha lexicon

On my bingo card of announcements I'd hear in 2022, the reveal of the sixth Armored Core game to be developed by From Software, the company that released the extremely successful Elden Ring just 10 months prior, was nowhere near it. Consumer surveys sent out by the company showed the developer's hand a bit, but still, even with that in mind, I didn't think we'd officially hear about this game in 2022, let alone see a trailer at one of gaming's most significant events. But I should know by now not to put anything surprising past From Software.

The first Armored Core was released over two decades ago, in 1997. Armored Core has always been about third-person, customizable mech combat, and based on what we saw in the Armored Core VI: Fires of Rubicon trailer, that seems to be the case here, too, with the series' sixth entry. Armored Core V was released just a handful of months after Dark Souls, the game series that would go on to define From Software from that point forward. The studio has made non-Dark Souls games like Bloodborne, Sekiro, and last year's Elden Ring, but Dark Souls' DNA is easy to spot and feel in each of those. That's to say that Armored Core is a From Software property that hasn't been affected by the influence of Dark Souls ... yet.

With just a trailer and a little information, it's unclear if that influence will be present in Fires of Rubicon or if this game will feel like the five Armored Core games before it. It's hard to imagine it won't have some flavors of a Soulsborne in it. Publisher Bandai Namco says Fires of Rubicon "will offer a game experience based on the mech game know-how From Software cultivated over 25 years of developing games in the series, but now introducing groundbreaking gameplay found in the developer's recent action games." Considering those "recent action games" are Souls or Souls-adjacent games, something tells me this Armored Core game will feel at home with fans, like me, who view From Software as the Soulsborne company more than anything else.

"In Armored Core VI Fires of Rubicon, players will be able to freely move through massive three-dimensional environments with rapid maneuverability while experiencing visceral vehicular combat," Bandai

Namco notes in a press release. “Signature to From Software’s carefully crafted game design, the game will feature challenging and memorable battles along with a fulfilling progression system and deep gameplay, all of it now powered by assembling mechs and going into combat with massive bosses. Players will recognize the sense of satisfaction and achievement when they overcome a difficult situation and relish momentary victory, and perhaps a boost to their standing, before encountering the next challenge.”

It sure sounds like a Soulsborne game. Even so, From Software president Hidetaka Miyazaki told *IGN* in a recent interview the studio has “not been making a conscious effort to try to direct it towards more Soulsborne type gameplay,” adding that “the essential direction of [Armored Core VI] was to go back and take a good look at the core concept of Armored Core and what made that series special.”

According to Miyazaki, that includes assembling and customizing your mech and ultimately, “a much higher degree of freedom.” *IGN* also spoke to the game’s director, Masura Yamamura, who stated that, “Armored Core is generally about the guns, and ordnance, and missiles,” a significant departure from what From Software has arguably perfected in the last decade of its games.

If I had to guess, Miyazaki and Yamamura are carefully threading the needle between longtime From Software fans who want Armored Core VI to be a traditional entry and Soulsborne fans who wish for the game to feel more at home with the studio’s recent suite of releases.

Interestingly enough, the thing that stuck out to me most in the Armored Core VI reveal trailer were the following lines: “Feed the fire” and “Let the last cinders burn.” Immediately, I thought of Dark Souls, a series that repeatedly highlights fire and flames, and both literally and metaphorically uses these words to express themes of darkness, light, renewal, rebirth, and more. If I put my theory hat on, I struggle to separate those two lines from the Armored Core VI trailer and the history of fire in the Dark Souls series, but that’s pure speculation on my part.

What isn’t speculation is that the reveal trailer features some great-looking mech combat. I can already imagine the different combinations of build loadouts, status effects, enemies, and more that will be in the game. Whatever Armored Core VI ends up being, I think From Software has earned our trust in its ability to develop a great action-combat game.

**BY WESLEY LEBLANC** ■

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**PLATFORM** PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
**STYLE** 1-Player Action (Multiplayer TBA) **PUBLISHER** Bandai Namco
**DEVELOPER** From Software **RELEASE** TBA

# Reviews

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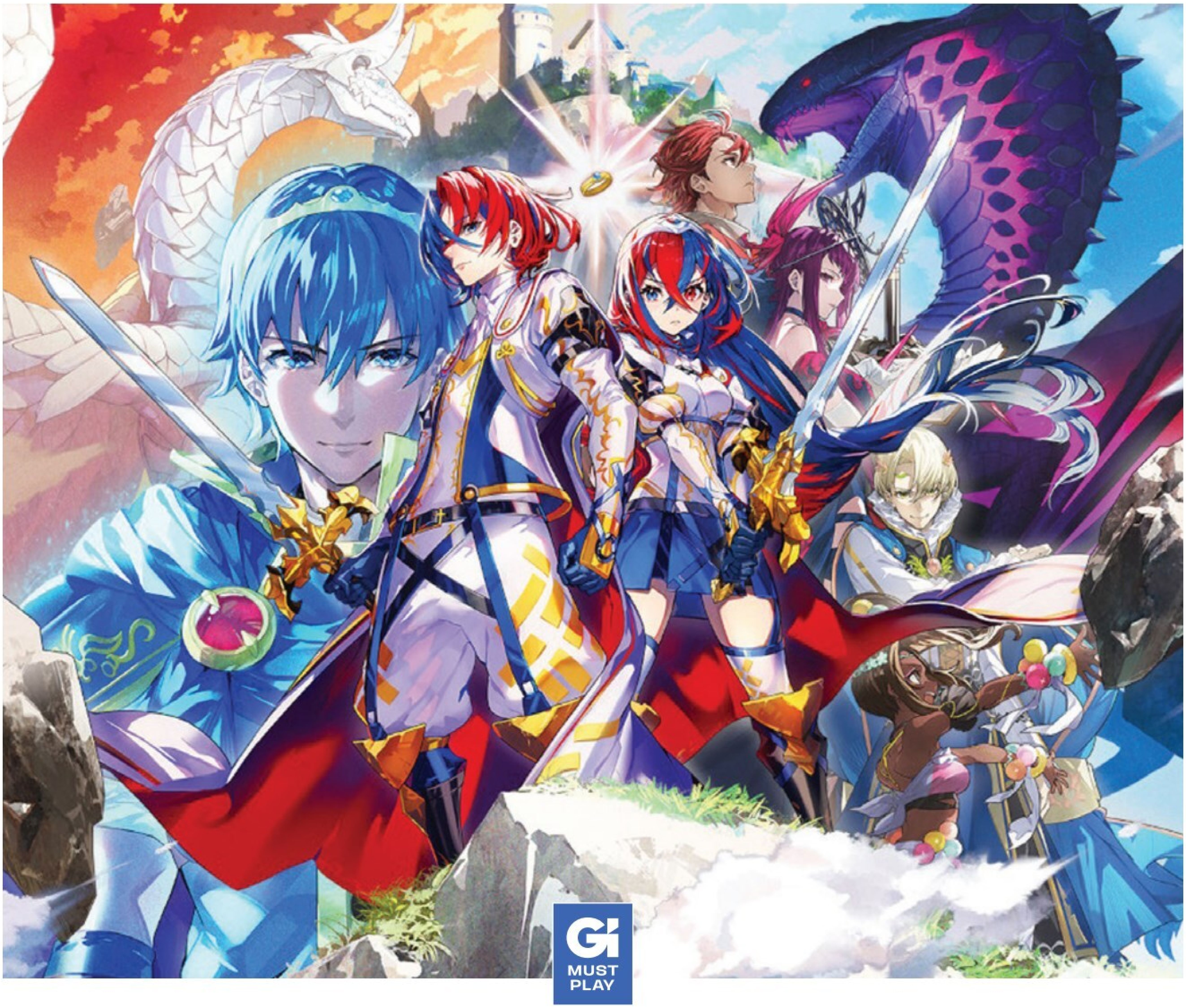
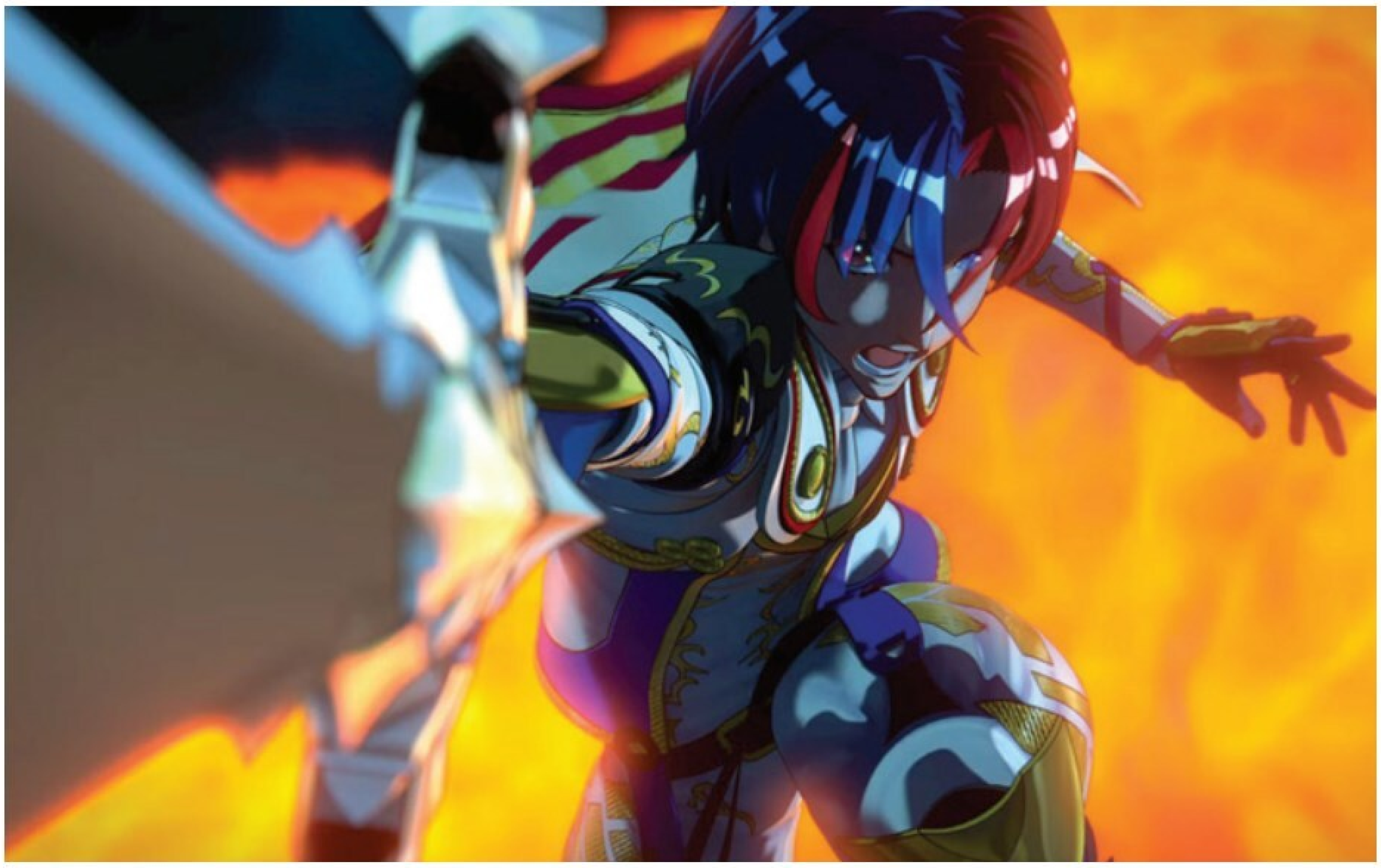


GI MUST PLAY

# FIRE EMBLEM ENGAGE

An engagement for the ages



Fire Emblem Engage is the mainline follow-up to 2019's excellent Fire Emblem Three Houses. Where Three Houses succeeded by emphasizing its larger-than-life heroes and social systems, while its combat took a backseat, Engage succeeds in doing the opposite. Engage is a combat-first, everything-else-second strategy RPG. And although its story takes some time to become interesting, its combat is terrific from the first battle and only gets better.

Engage's story begins in an overly familiar way: A hero saves the world from the Fell Dragon, an evil divinity, and goes into a slumber afterward. They awake 1,000 years later only to discover their battlefield prowess is needed once more. This protagonist, the Divine Dragon, must obtain all 12 Engage rings held by neighboring kingdoms. The narrative was simple and largely predictable for a large portion of my 50-hour playthrough. The last third of the game's story reeled me in with twists, turns, drama, and heart, though, and by the time I rolled the credits, I laughed that I had written the story off in the first place.

Engage's combat is a return to form for the Fire Emblem series, bringing back the traditional rock-paper-scissors formula where lances beat swords, swords beat axes, and axes beat lances, while fisticuff fighters have an advantage over archers, mages, and thieves. It's an admittedly simple formula that works because it forces you to examine unit placement, movement, and strategy well in advance based on enemy positioning on a given map. And this formula is strengthened by a game that builds upon the combat in virtually every sense; most everything you do ties back into what happens in battle, including the game's namesake, Engage.

Each unit can wear an Emblem Ring, which gives them the ability to Engage or tap into that ring's power fueled by the soul of a hero from Fire Emblem's past. This brings series favorites like Marth and Byleth, adding a heaping dose of nostalgia to Engage for longtime fans. For newer fans, the Engage mechanic is still a battlefield boon as it allows the wearer to change in appearance physically and become significantly more powerful for three turns. This mechanic felt overly powerful in the first half but still exciting nonetheless. But the second half is a stern reminder that strategy is still required in nearly every battle, including the Paralogue side quests, which is where developer Intelligent Systems really stretches its combat encounter prowess with challenging map layouts and matchups.

Social systems between units take a backseat to social standings with Emblem Ring heroes. As the bond level between a unit and an Emblem Ring hero increases, so do the skills available to purchase. These skills and abilities, like increased luck, can be equipped even when not wearing a given ring. So my Divine Dragon can, for example, equip traits from Marth's ring even if he's wearing an Emblem Ring of another hero. And even units that you never equip with an Emblem Ring can tap into these skills and abilities thanks to special Emblem bond training. Bond rings created by Emblem Ring heroes further expand the possibilities of combat-focused customization.

Engage's various ring mechanics power much of what you're doing in the game, but it's also mostly optional. If you want to play it straight, go for it. But if you're looking for deep customization and optimization, that's there too, and I appreciate that flexibility a lot.

You tinker with these rings at The Somniel, Engage's open hub where virtually everything outside of combat, like cooking, shopping, and more, happens. There are various minigames, too, as well as training options. It's expansive enough but, in most ways, a step back to Three Houses' monastery school, which felt like a crucial pitstop in between every combat encounter and a place I came to know like the back of my hand. The Somniel is also home to the Tower of Trials where three different multiplayer options can be accessed. They're interesting additions but feel half-baked, only there for those who desperately need more after the core game's dozens of combat encounters.

Engage's characters and social systems never quite hit the high bar set by Three Houses, but it does surpass its predecessor in almost every other way. Players looking for deep customization, expertly crafted strategy RPG combat, and a heartfelt story with adoration for more than 30 years of Fire Emblem history will find that and more in Engage.

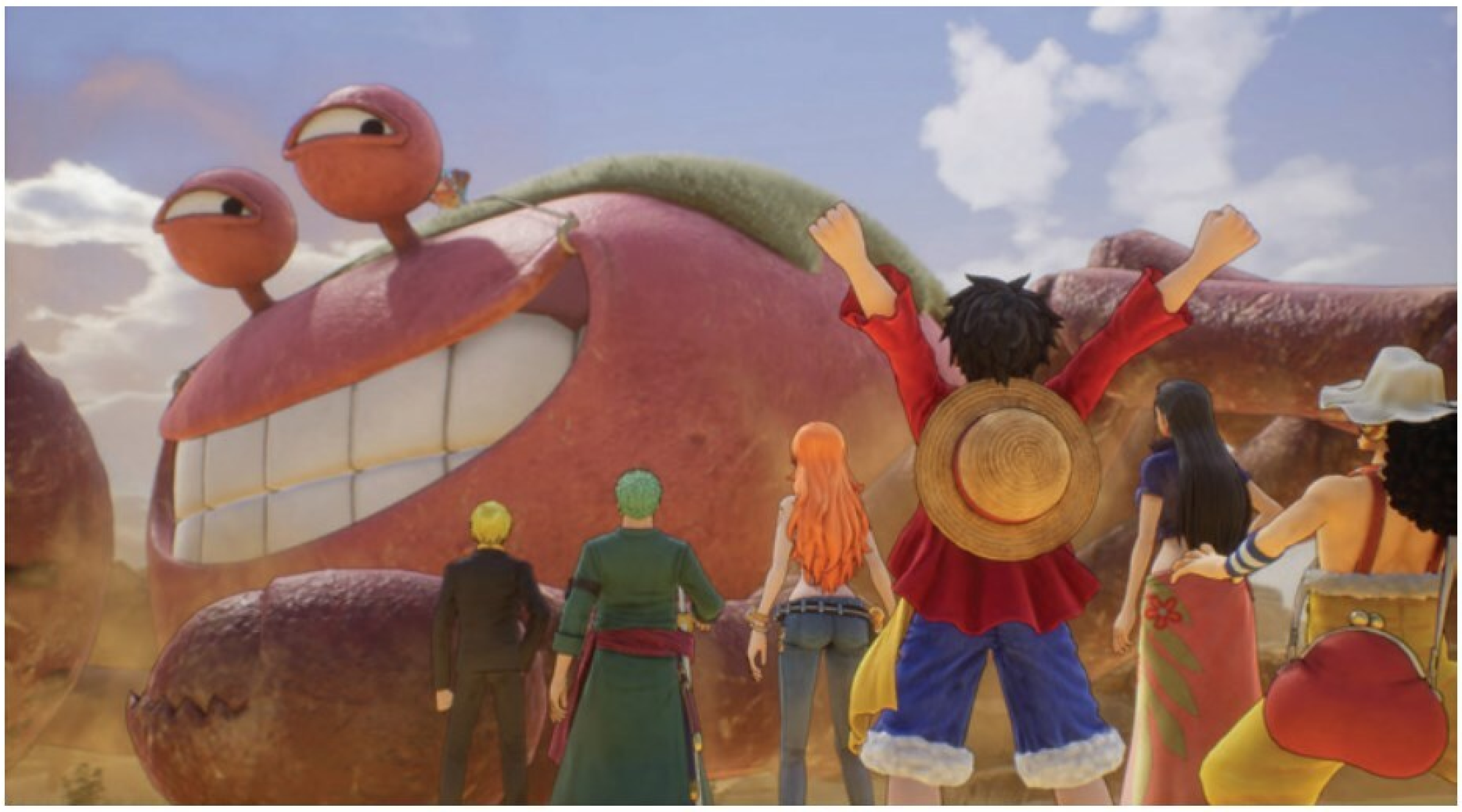
**BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

**9**

**PLATFORM** Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy/Role-Playing (5-Player Online)
**PUBLISHER** Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Intelligent Systems
**RELEASE** January 20 **RATING** T

# ONE PIECE ODYSSEY

## Fuzzy memories



"You know how fuzzy memories can be." It's a convenient and hand-wavy line delivered by the new character Lim, warning the Straw Hat Pirates of the impending adventures into some of One Piece's most popular story arcs. Likewise, One Piece Odyssey can be a fuzzy experience. It oscillates between being thrilling and tedious. Rarely does it follow through on the promise of discovering "what if...?" scenarios that entice longtime fans. Nor does it thrive as an introductory point for new fans with most of the context and characters in the core story flashbacks stripped away. While I'm conflicted about my time with One Piece Odyssey, there's plenty of fun adventure in this RPG outing despite some glaring holes throughout.

One Piece Odyssey's wholly original content starts slow but builds intrigue well every time I return to the island of Waford. That's where elastic outlaw Monkey D. Luffy and his notorious crew find themselves stranded. Trouble finds them quickly as a stoic girl named Lim uses her powers to separate Luffy and his friends from their strength and abilities, storing them in mystical cubes scattered around the island. Along with her caretaker, an explorer named Adio, Lim helps restore the Straw Hats' power. To do that, they must enter a world of memories to recover what was lost.

These early hours introduce not only turn-based battles but also exploration. Most Straw Hat crew members can be switched between while traversing the world, each with unique and valuable skills that fit naturally with the character. Being a rubber man, Luffy can stretch to grapple to areas in the environment and Chopper's small frame allows passage into tight spaces only he can fit. Crafting systems, such as cooking healing items with Sanji and forging accessories with Robin, are delightful touches that extend the characters' ship roles meaningfully into the gameplay. Combined with the authentic dialogue between the crew, One Piece Odyssey wonderfully realizes who these characters are.

With a mix of sketched and realistic textures, One Piece creator Eiichiro Oda's style translates spectacularly into the character models and world. Areas like Alabasta and Water Seven are well-realized, along with the creatures and funky-looking characters inhabiting them. The anime's Japanese VO cast also adds a welcome level of authenticity, making Odyssey feel like another chapter of the anime. While the addition of English VO or the anime's music would have been appreciated, what's there works well.

The attention to detail is on full display in Odyssey's turn-based battles, which like Luffy, have an abundance of flexibility. Maybe too much. Combat feels grand, splitting the crew into multiple micro-battles, usually making them fight their enemies before helping elsewhere unless ranged or AOE abilities are on hand. The process of picking off enemies and then consolidating the full force to clean up the surviving foes is satisfying, as is completing bonus objectives that reward additional experience. However, the option to swap the position of any character with no penalty makes fights a little too easy. Exchanging the places of Nami and Brook, who are supposed to be tied down in different zones, feels like cheating. The battle system has a lot of potential but not enough restraint to make it truly special.

While the initial adventures into Memoria drag, the second half picks up considerably as the action and the stakes in Memoria and on Waford hit a fever pitch. Much of the content Odyssey revisits is underwhelming, and void of context for the events at hand, save for some lore dumps in the game's menus. Still, critical moments in the final hours had me in awe, thanks to fun hypothetical situations with characters that didn't happen in the canon story. I wish these were more prevalent throughout One Piece Odyssey to make better use of the many wonderful settings and characters.

I have reservations about the experience as a whole, but I can't help but smile thinking about this adventure with the Straw Hats. It nails the core cast of characters, the Memoria areas are fun to revisit, and the revelations surrounding Waford, Lim, and Adio ultimately satisfy. I can't thoroughly recommend this voyage for someone new to One Piece, but seasoned pirates will find a worthy adventure on the horizon. **BY JOHN CARSON**

**7.5**

**PLATFORM** PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • PC
**STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
**PUBLISHER** Bandai Namco **DEVELOPER** Ilca
**RELEASE** January 13 **RATING** T

# FORSPOKEN

## Average Isekai

Forspoken is a game about movement and running. Protagonist Frey begins the game running from the law and debt collectors. She's also in the middle of a plan to flee New York City with a gym bag full of cash. Amidst that chaos, she falls into the land of Athia and is eager to leave the new, mysterious world where she inexplicably has superhuman combat and running abilities. Getting from one place to another is Forspoken's high point, and while no other element quite reaches the heights of how fun running and climbing are, Frey's adventure isn't without its highlights.

Unfortunately, Forspoken makes a bad first impression. Athia's environments look great, as does Frey when she moves through the world, but zooming in close for cutscenes shows some rough textures. The dialogue is also underwhelming and the storytelling is overly transparent. From Frey's cat, Homer, to the little girl who wins Frey's heart by stealing her phone in Athia, every character's role as a means to humanize Frey is too obvious, and her frequent and stubborn refusal of the hero's call is hammered too hard. Thankfully, Forspoken's story and dialogue improve the deeper you get.

By the end, I liked Frey's overly vulgar and combative nature and her antagonistic relationship with Cuff, her invisible partner that lives on her wrist. I also enjoyed the zoomed-out main path of the story. None of the twists were particularly surprising, but they were well executed and helped contextualize why Frey is so angry and why she is so insistent on not being the hero, even when everything obviously demanded she moves in that direction. I was also happy with where the game leaves Frey at the end, both from a character relationship perspective and a continued post-game gameplay perspective.

Forspoken is an action game, but calling it a third-person shooter wouldn't be out of line, as most of Frey's abilities function like magical guns. Frey has dozens of abilities to swap between on the fly, and taking advantage of enemy vulnerabilities means you're encouraged to do so often. I found a few I preferred, but success often meant switching to the sluggish weapon I didn't particularly want to use. Changing abilities is convoluted; even late in the game, I had to pause and think about which buttons I needed to hold to access certain weapons.

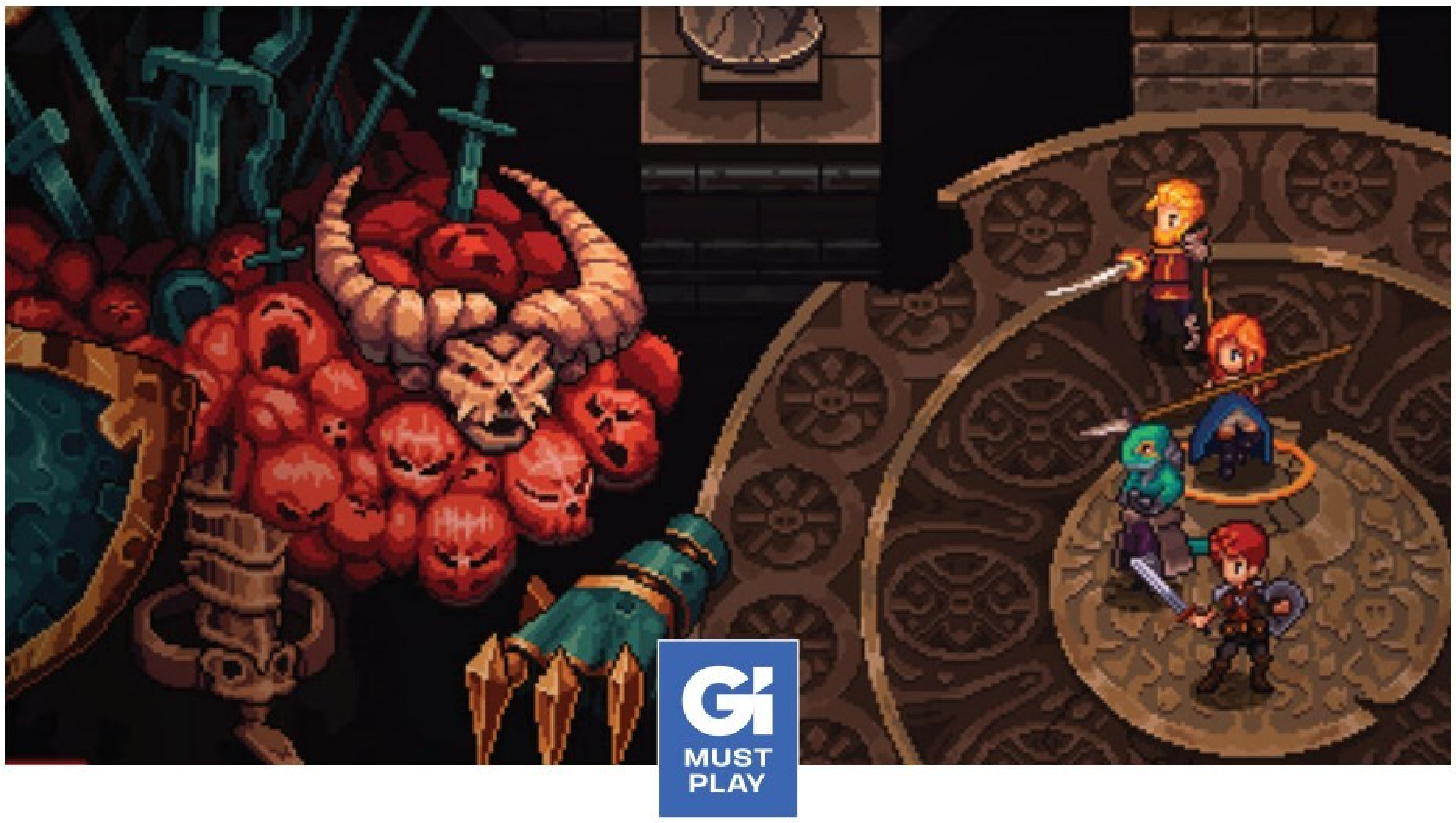
Where the story and general combat are hit-and-miss, movement is excellent throughout. Sprinting through Athia and leaping over buildings feels great, and a handful of additional movement abilities make things even smoother. An early upgrade that lets Frey long jump with well-timed button presses makes her move even faster and smoother. I went out of my way to track down every movement upgrade, and nearly all of them were substantial and fun. That joy of movement integrates into combat, where even if shooting doesn't feel great, dodging and leaping over enemy heads does.

Exploration is also enjoyable, thanks to a helpful automatic waypoint numbering system. On my way to a core destination, for example, I would mark a handful of locations to check out along the way and wouldn't have to revert to the map much because of the numbers.

Forspoken's story and combat fail to reach the heights of its movement and exploration, but thankfully those two latter elements make up most of the experience. I sprinted, often literally, through the campaign in about 15 hours, and now I have a large world filled with nooks and crannies I'm eager to run through and explore. The narrative won't linger with me, and I avoided combat in the open world often, but I loved making Frey leap and fly through Athia to discover all its treasure chests and secrets. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

**7.5**

**PLATFORM** PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
**PUBLISHER** Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Luminous Productions **RELEASE** January 24 **RATING** M



# CHAINED ECHOES

Old style, new ideas

Chained Echoes deceives at first glance, making you question if you missed it back when its seeming contemporaries, like Final Fantasy VI and Chrono Trigger, were making a big splash. Of course, the reality is this lavish and imaginative RPG is brand new, crafted mostly by a single developer as both an homage to and celebration of those old games, even while injecting a healthy dose of new concepts. The resulting adventure may look like something from 30 years ago, but it plays with a sophistication that deserves attention from any genre fan.

The developer delights in playing with your preconceived ideas. Sometimes, it's fulfilling those expectations at precisely the pace and moment you are most ready for them, in both story and gameplay, and at other times it's about subverting them. Ready for a new twist on combat? Here's a new additional system in which you control mechs in a fascinating alternate combat style, recalling classics like Xenogears. Think you understand the arc of the fated hero storyline? Maybe things are more complicated than you first guessed.

Along the way, the staples of classic JRPG-style adventuring appear in a balanced and rewarding loop. The thoughtfully designed combat system scales back on grindy, repetitive battles. Instead, every fight demands your full attention, leveraging enemy weaknesses, character abilities, on-the-fly party formation changes, and a unique overdrive mechanic to keep your party in the sweet spot of damage dealing. The party fully heals between combat, so it's always about throwing everything you have at the enemy. Even regular fights sometimes come down to only having one hero standing to strike the final blow. I found the high challenge enjoyable, especially since bad decisions and a game over led to an immediate choice to replay the battle, so the penalty for failure is negligible.

The upgrade, gear, and leveling systems are all engaging and filled with compelling decisions. Wearing a class emblem can enrich your chosen skills for each character, letting you specialize each hero in powerful ways. Weapons and armor can be improved and tweaked with gems that apply new bonuses, encouraging players to spend time in the menus playing the optimization game. There's even a fun "Reward Board" that offers precious materials and leveling options for completing specific tasks around the world, encouraging extensive exploration and discovery.

While playing within the established constraints of the genre, Chained Echoes also tells a mature and nuanced story, touching on themes of fate and free will, recovery from trauma, and the weight of guilt. Those and other tropes have plenty of room for exploration across dozens of hours of available stories and sidequests. Thankfully, it's an enjoyable fantasy world, filled with unusual species and monsters, intriguing biomes, and a complex geopolitical structure. At times, that last component of political elements can become overwhelming and hard to follow and distracts from the more compelling character drama. But give Chained Echoes enough time, and everything begins to make sense.

A beautiful throwback musical score is accompanied by pixel-style visuals that relay nostalgia without being a game you've played before. Even so, the scope of the narrative and maturity of the character interactions sometimes feels at odds with the retro aesthetic. That incongruity can be a plus, emphasizing moments of terror, war crimes, or betrayals. But at certain dramatic moments, the visual constraints hold the narrative back.

While Chained Echoes has the advantage of decades of distance from the games it looks to for inspiration, it's a better experience in many instances than those vaunted games from which it arose. I prefer this combat, storytelling, and approach to progression and exploration to many of the JRPGs I grew up so enamored with playing. That's the highest praise I can heap on a game so removed in time from the games to which it might be compared. Whether you currently count yourself a JRPG connoisseur or fondly recall the '90s heyday of the genre, Chained Echoes is well worth your time. **BY MATT MILLER**

**8.75**

**PLATFORM** PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
**STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Deck 13 Spotlight
**DEVELOPER** Matthias Linda **RELEASE** December 8 **RATING** M

# LIL GATOR GAME

By the time the story wrapped up, the game had delivered a poignant and touching message about balancing the important parts of our lives. Lil Gator Game isn't the best Zelda-like I've played, but it's probably the one that will stick with me for the longest. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

### 8.5

**PLATFORM** Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Playtonic Friends **DEVELOPER** MegaWobble **RELEASE** December 12 **RATING** E

# VENGEFUL GUARDIAN: MOONRIDER

Vengeful Guardian: Moonrider won't go down as one of the greats that both embrace the past and modernizes the action, but I would place it closer to the fantastic side of the scale, even if it doesn't quite make it all the way.

**BY KYLE HILLIARD**

### 7.75

**PLATFORM** PS5 • PS4 • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** The Arcade Crew **DEVELOPER** JoyMasher **RELEASE** January 12 **RATING** T

# SPORTS STORY

Even if Sports Story was polished and bug-free, it would still fall strikingly short of the first title in the series. The new sports don't play well, the fetch quests are tiresome, and the story is tedious and less charming than that of Golf Story. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

### 6.5

**PLATFORM** Switch **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Sports/Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Sidebar Games **DEVELOPER** Sidebar Games **RELEASE** December 23 **RATING** E10+

# DRAGON QUEST TREASURES

The experience is driven by charm and nostalgia, but if you don't have an existing appreciation for the series, there isn't much here that I could recommend over most other open-world role-playing games. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

### 6.25

**PLATFORM** Switch
**STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
**PUBLISHER** Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Square Enix
**RELEASE** December 9 **RATING** E10+

# HIGH ON LIFE

Though it swings for the fences on presentation and tone, the mediocre action, grating humor and dialogue, and less amusing technical hiccups made me want to keep its sentient guns in their holsters. **BY MARCUS STEWART** ■

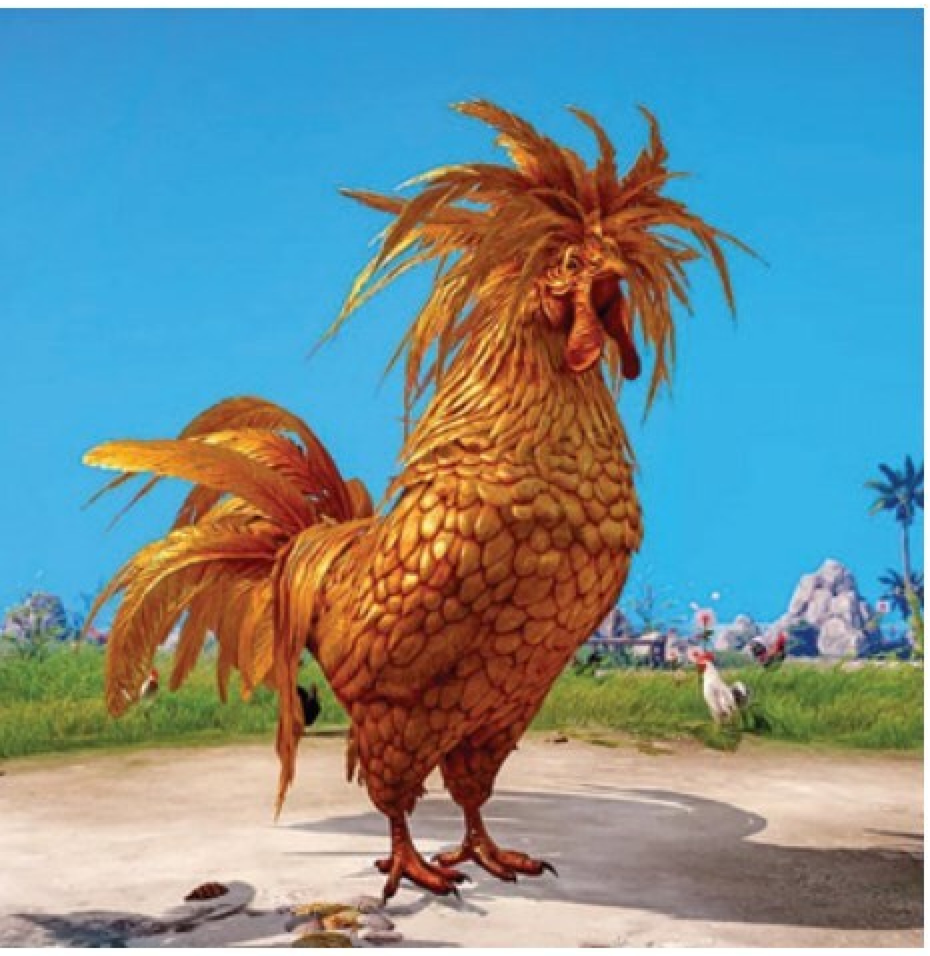
### 5.75

**PLATFORM** Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter **PUBLISHER** Squanch Games **DEVELOPER** Squanch Games **RELEASE** December 13 **RATING** M

# Behind the Magic of MMO Localization

**Much deeper than simply translating text** BY HAYES MADSEN

Lost Ark's Chickings



Lost Ark, co-developed by South Korean studio Smilegate, has a creature called "Chicking." In Korean, it only uses two characters (치킹). But when translated into German, it becomes "Gockelkönig." Now those two characters have become 11, creating a whole new problem for how to fit the text in the same speech bubble. And that's just one name in a game with millions of words, with more added all the time.

Localizing a video game is a daunting task – much more complicated than simply translating the text. Localizers not only need to consider references and sayings that may not make sense in local languages, but also implement everything within the game's systems and user interface. The complexity of localization increases tenfold for MMORPGs, and it's something Rich Lambert, creative director for Elder Scrolls Online, refers to as a "black box," even for those within the industry. It may seem as simple as sending text off to a team that makes "magic" happen. But the process is surprisingly complex and detailed, often requiring teams of dozens of people working consistently to keep the game up to date in languages worldwide.

Because of how MMOs are structured, there's often a ton of text and dialogue that goes into an experience, especially when you factor in sidequests, hundreds of pieces of equipment, U.I. elements, and more. The exact process of localization differs depending on the studio and resources available. For example, translation on Phantasy Star Online 2 is largely outsourced alongside a small in-house team at Sega. Amazon Games has a dedicated team of over 100 employees working on various projects, including Lost Ark, which it publishes.

"When Lost Ark launched [worldwide, outside of Korea] in February 2022, it contained more than three million words of English text. That's about the same length as every book in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series... multiplied by two," says Laura Sturr, head of business operations and player experience at Amazon Games. "Translating the in-game text is just the start of our work. Once menus and user interface elements are translated, the layout may need to be modified for the western version. When translating NPC speech, the original Korean dialogue is reviewed to ensure the translation matches the tone and emotion of the original dialogue."

Part of what makes MMO localization so unique is the team doesn't simply move onto the next project when the title releases, but rather shifts its focus to post-launch support. This means fixing any potential mistakes, figuring out ways to improve the overall experience, and of course, looking toward the future.

## A Never-Ending Stream of Content

Bethesda Softworks, the studio behind Elder Scrolls Online, has shifted its focus over the years, now having a team dedicated entirely to localization, separate from the main development team. Lambert says this team has been essential in keeping the game as polished as possible and making it so the localized version of content releases simultaneously with the English version.

"We give the localization teams the English voice actor work, so they know roughly how long a line is. That's really, really important because a lot of the theater scenes in the game are timed to those lines," Lambert says. "If you get something back that's three times longer, well, then you have to go in and retime that stuff. And that's a lot of extra work. So, the teams are constantly trying to find ways to improve that process, to make it easier and have less work on the back end."

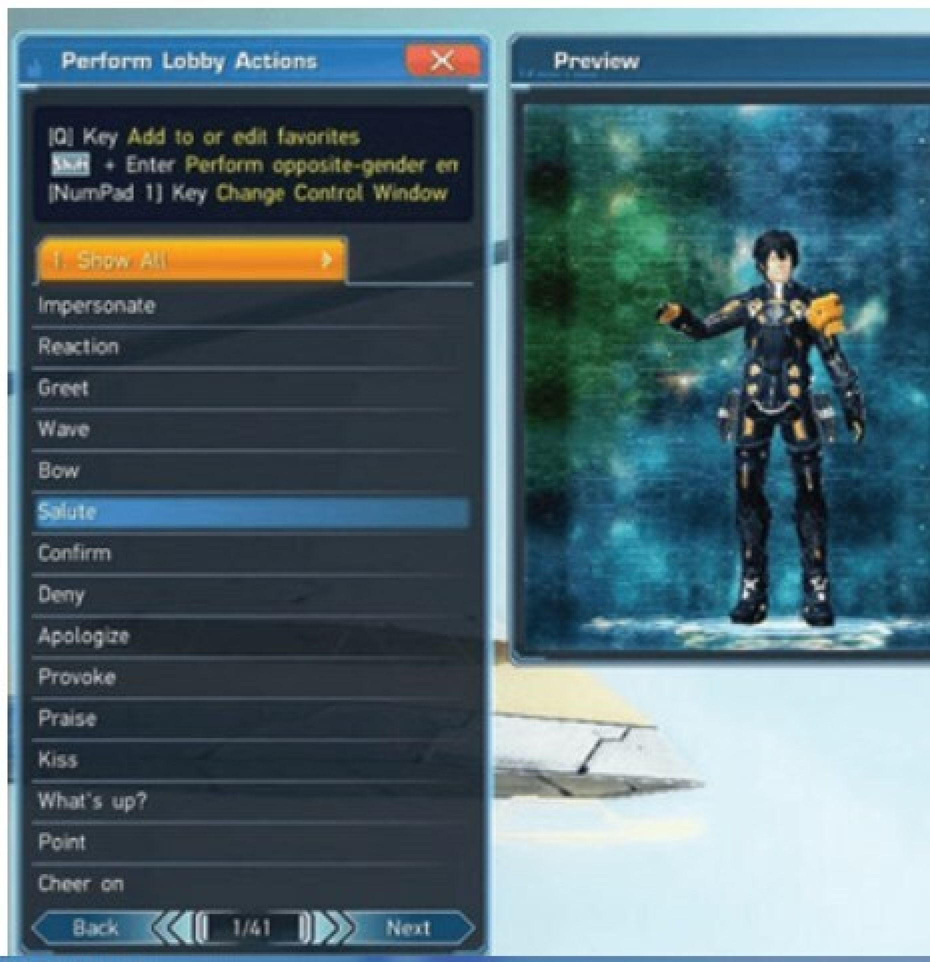
Any localization team needs to consider references, puns, and cultural jokes. But the sheer amount of content, and the way it's delivered, means MMO localizers must think about these things in new ways. Sega's localization team expands on this, saying, "In addition to text, we feel that the number of localization issues are expanding in terms of the global situation. For example, there are issues with certain images and graphics, and NGS [New Genesis, a large update for PSO released in 2021] now allows Emotes that use hand and finger gestures, but these can take on a completely different meaning depending on the region." For example, the "peace sign" is commonly used across the United States, but in countries like Ireland and Australia, seeing a "V" sign with the back of the hand can equate to the middle finger.

Lambert illustrates an issue the Elder Scrolls Online team ran into early on – having to factor in how Asian countries, especially China, might view skeletons used in questlines. Skeletons have long been a part of Elder Scrolls, but many Asian cultures view skeletons as bad omens or bad luck. "You have to think about the types of stories you're going to tell and the types of monsters you're going to use. You just have to be a little bit more aware of the cultural differences," says Lambert. Even tiny differences like in-game references need to be adjusted for different regions. In the Korean version, Lost Ark features an in-game fast food chain called Mom's Touch, named after a popular local chain, but in the western release, the name was changed to Tortoyky Fried Chicken.

It's hard to properly quantify the amount of work that goes into localizing massive RPGs in the lead-up to release, but the vital difference with MMOs is their content releases don't stop at launch. Massive multiplayer games live and die based on how well they keep their player bases invested, and having to localize new content creates a special challenge constantly.

Middle:
Phantasy Star
Online 2's (PSO2)
emote menu

Bottom:
Phatansy Star
Online 2: New
Genesis character
creation menu
↗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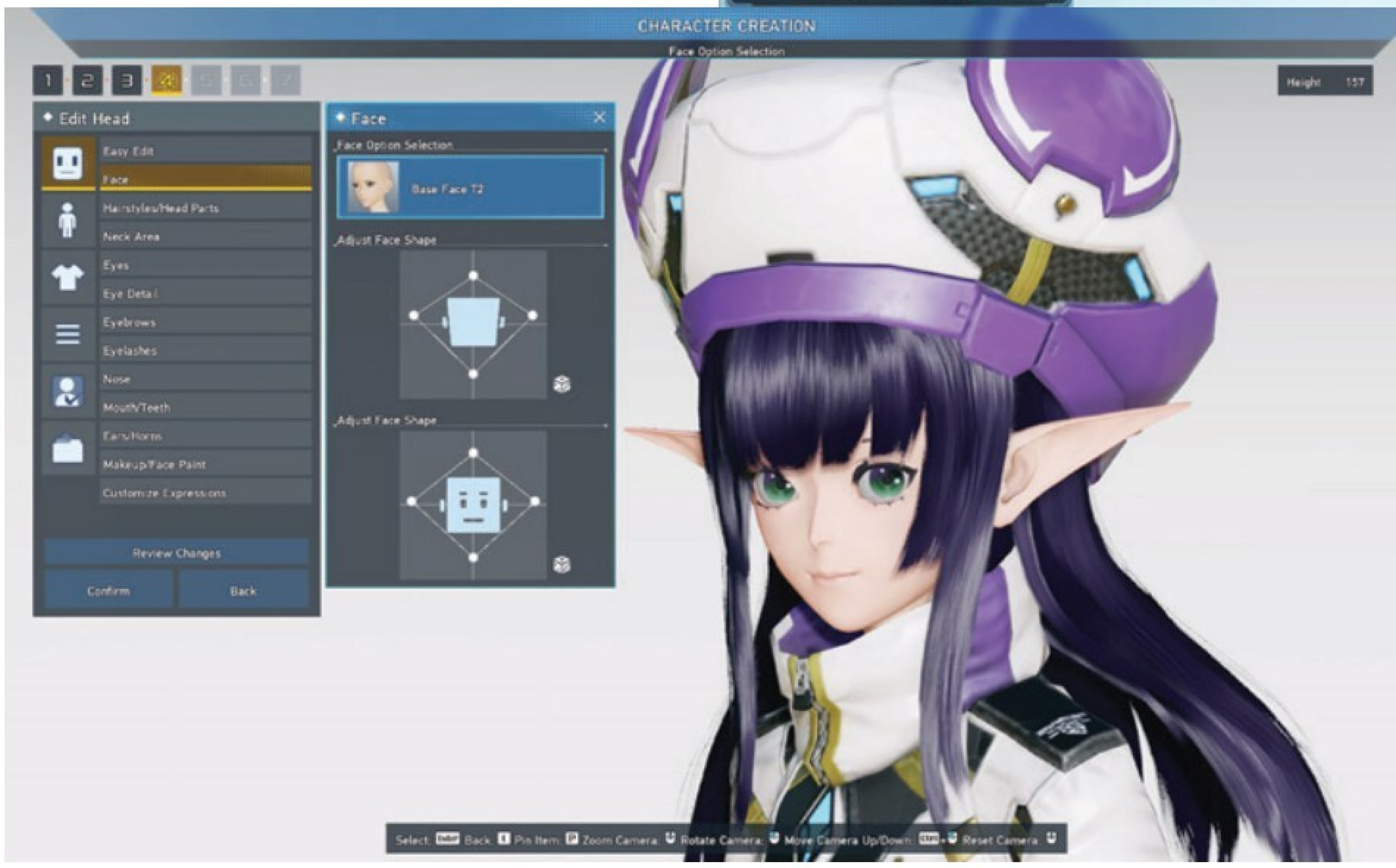
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Nose
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This means there needs to at least be a plan for moving forward, even if the work isn't going to happen right away. "Something that sets Lost Ark apart from other live service games is the development team's commitment to adding new content and adjusting existing content, all in a speedy enough cadence that there's always something new and exciting for the player," says Sturr. "This leads to a unique challenge for us to balance schedules for three, four, or sometimes five different future game updates at a time."

## Keeping a Record

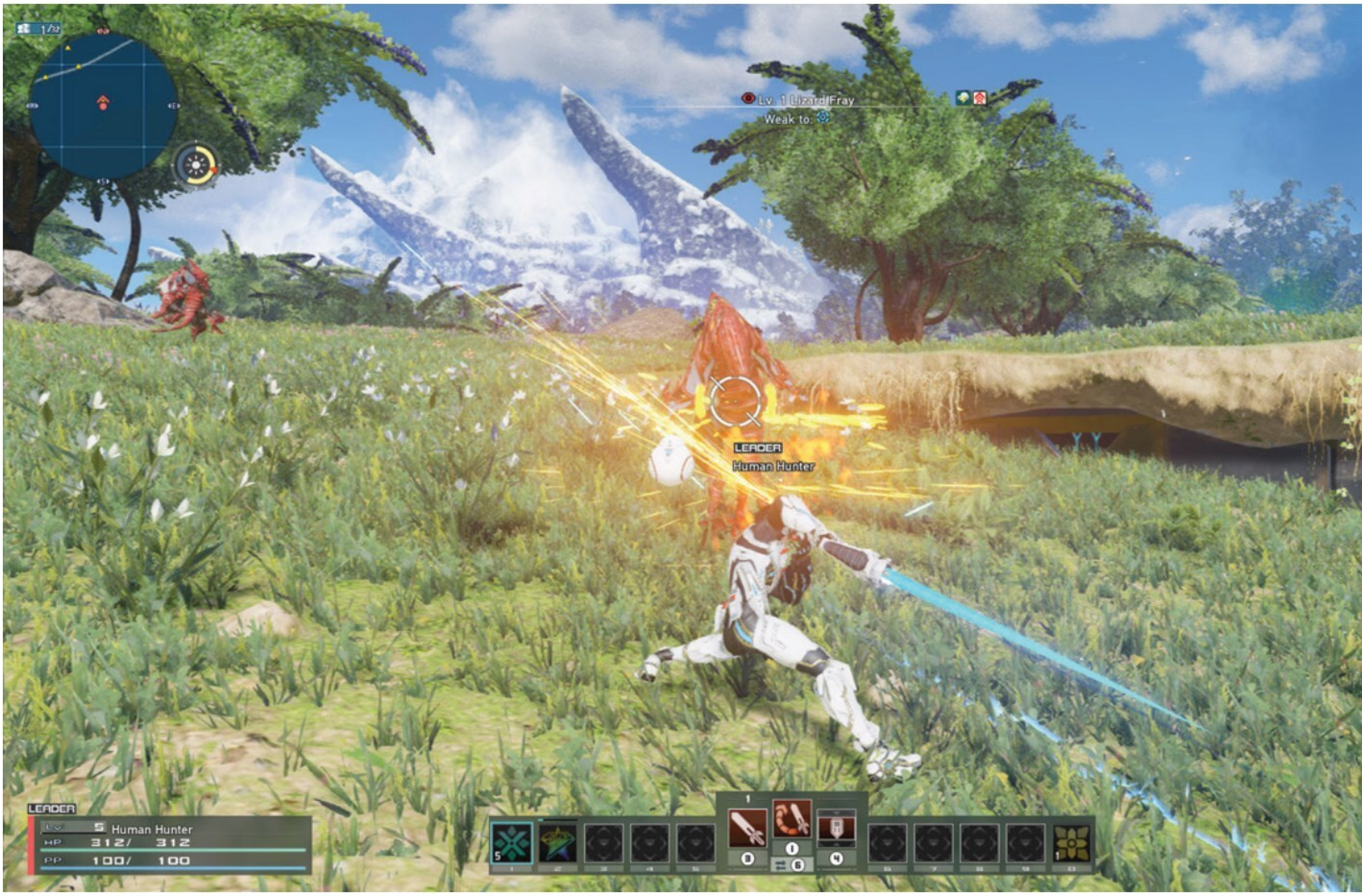
One vital piece of the process mentioned by all three development teams is their massive glossaries of terms and lore, ensuring any localization work remains consistent for months and years after release. Lost Ark, Elder Scrolls Online, and Phantasy Star Online 2 all have glossaries that grow and change along with the game whenever the teams have time to update them. Sega notes that the localization team also chips in to help with additional materials outside the game, such as website info and the official Phantasy Star Online 2 comic series.

Teams also need to be aware of additional languages that may be supported in the future. The localization team for Elder Scrolls Online has made serious efforts to include more languages from across the globe, currently supporting English, German, French, Russian, Spanish, Japanese, and, later this year, simplified Chinese.

"We've had a really strong worldwide presence, but some communities adapt to it a little bit more readily. And depending on the size, we try to make sure that we can support those communities as best we can," says Lambert. "So, it's a bit of, 'What are the community sizes? What is the demand for it?' mixed in with some of the business side of things. What makes sense from a business side?"

Keeping an MMO localization current and culturally sophisticated is a massive amount of work. But MMOs thrive on their player bases, and widening the net to capture more players from more regions is only a good thing. Localization is an arduous process by any

Phantasy Star Online 2: New Genesis combat U.I. ↗



measurement, but the way localization needs to grow and change alongside the game seems to be part of the appeal for those doing it.

"We feel that the most exciting part of localizing an online game is that it changes and evolves with each update, and the challenges are greatly increased by the need to keep up with real-world current trends, as well," says the Phantasy Star Online 2 team. "We actually do make minor adjustments and corrections to the translations based on the changes made with each update, community feedback, and the overall vibe among players."

Video game localization feels like the epitome of a "how the sausage gets made" situation, with so much of the community and industry not knowing the depth it takes outside of simply translating lines of text.

"A great localization is actually an intersection of extreme project management, deep product knowledge, and highly sophisticated cultural knowledge to lean into the preferences of customers from around the world without being too general or focusing on too narrow of an audience," says Sturr. ■

Elder Scrolls Online (ESO)
↖

ONE LAST THING

# MOST INESCAPABLE GAME

GREEN
CUBES
DAILY

Full disclosure – the final award on the final page of our year-end round-up issue is for a game that did not release in 2022. Developer Josh Wardle released Wordle at the tail end of 2021, but its popularity crested in 2022 before the *New York Times* purchased it. Whether you loved Wordle as a daily distraction or despised it while wading through colored blocks on your social media platform of choice, there is no denying that Wordle made an impact. Gamers and non-gamers alike found joy in its simple letter-guessing mechanics, and it was, frankly, impossible to ignore. ■

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